Faerie Queen
Jennie Taylor

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Moraise Daishe Forest
home of the spirit people
Latenmarh Sea
home of the merfolk
Avensho Outpost
Sheaubairnia
Palace
Shailmeya
Aschailhof Village
Tel-Nachta
territory of the elves
Emithair
Vaibecho-Steas
Arraigemuer Sea
Okiet Chryad Ocht
territory of the orcs

CHAPTER ONE

“Renee!” Cecilia shouted over the fence. She opened the gate and hurried toward me. “Oh, good morning Mr. and Mrs. Harris.” she said, nodding to my parents across the table from me. “Er, um, and you too, Mr. and Mrs. Harris.” she said, looking at my grandparents beside me.

My parents and I were having one last breakfast with them before my grandparents left later in the day. Summer had begun early, even for Kansas, and while it was nice out, it would be sweltering hot before noon.

“Hi, Cil.” I said, looking up into her bright eyes.

Cecilia Bern has the most amazing lavender eyes. She's the only person I've ever met with eyes like that. In fact, I didn't even know that it was humanly possible to have eyes that color until I met her.

“We have to talk!” Cecilia told me.
“Care for some french toast, Cecilia?” my mother asked.
“No thank you.” she said quickly, then turned back to me. “I *need* to talk to you, Ren.”
“What's up?” I asked her.
“Can we go inside? I have to tell you something, and –”
“We were just heading to the airport, Cecilia.” Dad told her. “We have to see Renee's grandparents off. You're welcome to come along.”
“Oh, thank you, but I can't. I have to go.” she told him. She looks so upset about something.
“I'll call as soon as we get back.” I told her.
“When will that be?”
“Shouldn't be more than two hours.” Dad said.
“Fine!” she answered, looking down at her watch. “Don't call, just come over, Renee.” she said.
“Yeah, sure. Are you going to tell me what's up?”
“I...” she looked over at my parents and grandparents, then back. “I'll

explain later. I gotta go."

She turned and hurried down the walk, toward the gate. I called out a goodbye, and she turned and gave a forced smile and wiggled her fingers in a wave.

"She seems to be very jittery this morning." Mom said.
"Yeah." I replied, still watching the gate where Cecilia exited.
"Renee," Grandpa said.
"Yeah." I replied..
"Renee," he repeated. He waited until I turned toward him. "Are you two dating?"
"What, um... I mean..."
"Oh *are* you two dating?" Grandma asked. There was a smile in her voice.
"No!"
"She's a nice girl?"
"I –"
"Why aren't you?" Grandpa asked.

Well this is an uncomfortable conversation to have. We've never even talked about girls since I came out last year. I sorta figured they weren't comfortable with the topic.

"So... so... I mean we... aren't." I said.
"Have you ever talked about it?" Grandma asked.
"Talked about... I... I mean... no."
"Well you should talk to her." Grandpa said. He reached over and patted Grandma's arm. "The best relationships start off as the best friendships many times."
"She likes guys." I mumbled.
"I thought she was gay." Mom said.
"She's bi." I explained, feeling like I had violated Cecilia's trust just by talking about it with them.
"If you like her you should talk to her about it." Grandma said, giving me a conspiratorial grin. "You never know what will happen until you try."
"You two do seem good together." Dad added. He's good with things like this. Far better than Mom. It's weird, actually.
"You're all putting her on the spot now, that's enough." Mom said, coming to my rescue. "We should leave for the airport or we'll be late."

I spent a lot of the trip to the airport thinking about what they had

said. Of course I've thought about her, but it would never work. I mean I kind of hinted once before, but she ignored it, which clearly means she isn't interested. And that's okay. I mean she's my best friend and I don't want to lose her by trying to force something that isn't there.

I wish there was something there.

Why did they have to bring this up when I've worked so hard to keep my feelings for her buried!

I was squished between Grandma and Grandpa on the way to the airport. We had a fun discussion about eggplants. Yeah, really. We said our goodbyes before they entered the security line.

“You have to tell her how you feel, Renee.” Grandma whispered to me when we hugged.
“Grandma –”
“Just trust your old grandma on this one, sweetie.” she said, winking as she pulled back from me. “I have a feeling.”

The trip home was excruciating. I played with my necklace as I thought of Cecilia and what she means to me. I am in love with her, it's true. Apparently my family sees it. I only hope Cecilia never does, because it would make things awkward since she doesn't feel the same way. It could ruin our friendship, and she means too much to me.

The necklace is the one Cecilia gave me when I was in the hospital seven months ago. It's a short chain, barely longer than a choker, and has a little rose gold pendant that is shaped like a shield with intertwining vines on it. I think it's real gold. Cecilia gave me the necklace for luck.

I had been out jogging in the morning and a texting driver swerved onto the sidewalk and hit me. I was in the hospital for almost a week while I recovered, and the doctors were worried about internal injuries. That was only a few weeks after I had met Cecilia, but she visited every day. None of my other friends visited, or even called or texted.

Not one. Not even once.

Cecilia was there every day. And on the third day, when I was whining that nobody else had visited, she took the necklace from her

neck and put it around mine. She told me it was for luck, but also so I wouldn't feel lonely, that there would always be a little piece of her there with me. She told me that all a person ever needed was one true friend.

I think that's when I realized I was falling for her.

My parents and I got back from dropping my grandparents at the airport and I took off up the street toward Cecilia's house, which is six blocks over. The more that I thought about the way she acted this morning, the more worried I got.

“Cil!” I yelled, rushing through the front door of their house. Her father is never home, so nobody is there but her most of the time. And by never there I mean I've never met him, actually. “Cil?”
“Renee!” she shouted. She hurried in from the kitchen. “We don't have much time.”
“Time for what? What are you talking about?”
“I have to go away.” she told me.
“Go where?”
“I have to go back home. My dad, he... it's complicated Ren.”
“*What* is complicated? I thought your dad lived here with you.”

She can't go away! Not now. She's talking crazy.

“I'm going to miss you so much, I just... I had to say goodbye before I left.” She stepped forward and hugged me. “Ren, you have to take care of yourself.”
“When are you leaving?” I asked, my heart sinking as my world collapsed.
“Princess,” a voice said.

I looked up just as a very odd looking man entered the room. He was very tall, and he was dressed in a strange green tunic, with leaves on it. Like, real leaves. And his eyes...

“You have purple eyes too.” I said. “Is this your dad?”
“No,” she said. “He has... you think his eyes are purple?”
“Well yeah,” I said, turning back to her. “Just like yours. Is he related to you or something?”

They shared a look, passing some kind of message to each other. Or maybe I'm just imagining things, I don't know.

“Your father demands your presence, Your Highness.” the man said to Cecilia.
“I'm trying to say goodbye to –”
“Now.” the man told her.
“Give me two minutes.” she said.
“You have one.”

He turned and marched toward the kitchen, leaving us alone. Cecilia turned to me and I saw that she was upset too.

“There isn't time to explain everything. I'm a –”
“Princess?” I asked.
“Well yeah, that too.”
“Too?”
“I'm a faerie.”
“A what now?” I asked, sure I had misheard her. “Did you say –”
“A faerie, Renee. Yes, a real life faerie.”
“Uh-huh.” I said, twirling my finger next to my ear to indicate what I thought of the idea.
“Yes, okay, I'm nuts. Whatever. The point is, I have to go. My father –”
“The King?” I asked, managing not to laugh.
“Exactly! He... he is going to make me take part in this binding ceremony, and –”
“Bind –”
“Binding ceremony!” she shouted. She wiped her hand over her face in frustration. “I don't have time to explain it all. I just wanted a chance to say... to tell you goodbye.” She paused and closed her eyes, then took a deep breath before continuing. “You'll never know how much I will miss you.”
“Well... I mean... well we can skype, or –”
“There's no internet where I'm going.”
“Seriously?” Wow, what kind of a backward country is her father the king of?

What am I saying, she's about as much of a princess as I am.

“Well we'll text.”
“No cell phones, either.”
“When will you be back?” I asked.
“Ren, once I go there... I... can't ever come back again. My father, he's not well. I will be... they're going to be preparing me to take over.”
“To be queen?” I asked, laughing at that thought, even though I was trying not to cry over the fact that she was leaving.
“Yes.”

“Well maybe once you're queen you can install some cell towers so we can text.”
“Ha.” she said. “Maybe.”

Okay, so she's insane. But she really *is* going away, apparently. Judging by the five guys armed with swords who just entered the room. Royal guards? Sure, why not. Hey, we may as well all go nutty.

“You can't leave me.” I told her. “I'm sorry, I just... I can't let you do that.”
“There's no other...”

She stopped and looked at the guy who before had told her she could have one minute. She looked from him to me, then back at him.

“We have to go now.” he told her.
“I'm not going unless she comes too.” she told him.
“Princess,”
“Lo, I refuse to leave without her.”
“Wait,” I said, shaking my head. “What are you talking about?”
“Come with me, Renee.” she said, excited.
“I can't go anywhere without asking my parents.”
“You'll only be a few hours. And when it's done I just might be able to come back with you.” she said. She looks so hopeful. “If it works.”
“If what works?”
“Lo?” she said, looking at him.

He snapped his fingers and a couple of the other guys surrounded me and grabbed onto my arms. Cecilia hugged me.

“It's going to be okay.” she said. “But things may seem a little weird where we're going.”
“Weirder than three people with purple eyes?” I asked, looking around. “And one with orange?”
“She can see that?” one of the guys asked.
“Ha ha, yes!” she said, squeezing me. “Even weirder. Faeries are going to seem odd to you, but I promise you nothing will happen to you there. Come on.”

We headed out of the house through the back door. In the back yard, behind the tool shed, was... well, it was a couple of bushes with what I... I mean I don't even know how to explain it! It was like the space between them was all blurry and hard to look at. Kind of like that heat mirage you see coming up off the highway when it's a hundred and

ten degrees out.

“So you may not understand what is going on when we get there.” she said.
“Which would be such a huge departure from my current condition.” I replied.
“What I think is going to happen is my father is going to be angry with me, and send me back to continue the search for my prince.”
“You're what?”
“Our tradition is that I must marry to hold the throne.”
“Right, okay.”

I'm not sure I can take watching her marry some guy. This is awful. Insane, but awful.

“Anyway, if that doesn't happen, he could just force me to choose one of the eligible guys he has there.”
“So you have to pick from whoever he brings along?”
“If I haven't found anyone myself, yeah basically. Anyway, if whoever I pick turns me down, I would usually get a mourning period and have time before having to select someone. So I may be able to buy some time.”
“To come back for your senior year, maybe?” I asked.
“Yeah, maybe.” she replied, laughing. “So the thing is, we're going to use the rules to our advantage.”
“We?”
“Yes!” she said. “You're in on this. We're tricking him into letting me have more time.”
“How are we –“
“The important thing I need you to remember is if my father seems to ask you anything, just shake your head and say no. Got it?”
“What would he...” I looked up. “Whoa!”

We were in another world. I mean really, literally, honestly *another world*! There were trees everywhere. They were like two hundred feet tall and had bark that was blue with sparkles of silver. Bushes with flowers like I've never seen decorated the roadside. And the guards, and Cecilia had...

“Wings!” I shouted. “Holy poop, you *are* a faerie!”
“You can see that?” she asked, laughing. “I told you I was a faerie.”
“How can she see that?” one of the guards asked.
“Well, I mean they're right there, ya know.” I said, waving my hand out and *through* Cecilia's wing. “Oh, sorry! Did that... hurt, or

something?"
"Princess," the guard asked. "Your friend is human, isn't she?"
"Yes. Why?"

The grass, the trees... *everything* looked different. In so many ways I couldn't even fathom how it was possible.

I have to be dreaming.

All the trees and bushes here, or at least the ones within sight, have a bluish tint to them. Even the dirt.

Not the flowers!

Holy mother of monkeys!

There are flowers back home, but these are *FLOWERS*! They must be forty feet tall, with stems the size of my little finger, but with flowers, like, impossibly large! Like dining table large! And vivid colors of orange and red.

And as we walked—the guards guiding me along because my head was swiveling to take it all in—I saw a flock of tiny little birds that were kind of a lime green, with massive heads and four wings. They would dip and turn at unnatural angles, and I could see there was a translucent tail trailing several inches behind each of them.

A bright red salamander about four inches long scurried into the path. It spun in our direction in alarm, and the weeds around it suddenly smoldered and turned black. One of the guards muttered that they aren't usually found this far from water, and told the others to keep their eyes out for the mother. It scurried away as quickly as it appeared.

Then there was a massive stone gate before us. We walked through, and there were hundreds of... of faeries all around us. And not a one of them was two inches tall and sprinkling faerie dust. In fact, most were incredibly tall, and all of them had wings.

"Can you fly?" I whispered to Cecilia.
"What you're calling wings is more of an aura." she explained. "Like our energy, our..."
"Magic?"
"Our lifeforce." she said.

“So you don't?” I asked. “Fly?”
“*I* don't.”
“Oh.” Does that mean some of them do?

A large man standing at the top of a set of stairs on a raised platform turned toward us. He had a hint of a smile, but there was anger in his purple eyes as well. He waved a staff the color of silver and... kind of a... well, I don't even know how to explain the color it was. Not any color I've ever seen before, honestly.

“Come, my wayward child.” he beckoned to Cecilia. His voice was deep and strong. *And* scary.
“This is the king?” I asked her.
“My father.” she nodded and stepped toward him. I see where her olive complexion and black hair come from. And her height! “How are you doing, Your Majesty?” she asked him.
“Well enough.” he said. He smirked. “Let us begin now, you've kept us waiting long enough.”
“Yes, sir.” she said.

She stepped back toward me and grabbed my forearm, then dragged me along onto the platform. There were so many people watching us, and I had no clue what to do. I felt so alien. I just stood beside Cecilia and hoped I didn't do anything to make the king mad at me. He was a scary looking faerie, that's for sure.

A faerie. OMG!

“I shall dispense with all the nonsense and just ask you to pick one of these gentlemen.” he said, waving his staff in the general direction of a line of a dozen men. “All have been thoroughly vetted and would make a good husband for you, Princess.”
“Father, I don't want to do this.”

There was a grumble through the crowd. Several of the men she was to choose from looked back and forth at each other, scowls on their faces.

The king looks pissed.

“Silence!” he shouted, pounding his staff down, causing a boom as loud as if a bomb had gone off. “Cecilia,” he said, pointing his staff at her. She stood her ground, but I stepped back away from that thing. “I let you go into the human world, let you search for a full year to find

someone you loved so you wouldn't have to select from these men here. But you never even tried!"
"Father,"
"Did you ever find anyone you were interested in? Anyone you had the least feelings for?" he asked.
"I did." she said. There was a murmur in the crowd, but it died with a look from the king. "I found someone, and because of that I cannot promise myself to anyone else." she said. "I'm sorry."
"You must select!" he said.
"Father,"
"*Now*, Cecilia."

She was crying now. I wanted to tell her everything was going to be okay, but I was about two seconds from passing out. This was either all real, in which case my whole universe was *way* different than I had been led to believe, or I was having the most vivid hallucination of all time.

Probably the latter.

"Choose!" he shouted at her with his booming voice.
"Fine!" she shouted, raising her chin defiantly. "I will."
"Finally," he said.
"I choose Renee Harris."

The crowd was noisy again. I'm pretty sure I was about to pass out. That, or wet myself. Or maybe pass out *and* wet myself. Either way, it was going to be embarrassing. I didn't get a chance.

"Be serious." the king said. He smiled. "Am I to understand that this," he pointed his staff at me and I winced. "Is this *Renee Harris*?" he asked, chuckling.
"Yes, Father."

He stared at her for a long, long time. The crowd was dead silent now. The king walked slowly back and forth in front of her, his boots clunking on the floor of the platform. Then a small grin came across his face.

"This is unusual." he said to her.
"I know that." Cecilia said. "If you won't allow this I will understand. I just... it would break my heart, Father. I don't think I could continue on at this time with any other selection."

She's really playing it up. I almost believe her. Almost.

“I see.” he said, still grinning. “That's how it is.”

He paced again, and at least twice his eyes darted up toward me, sending shivers through me each time. And then he stopped several feet in front of me and pointed to the stage, right in front of his feet. I didn't move immediately, but got the idea when a guard gave me a shove forward. I stepped to the spot and fought back the hyperventilation.

“Renee, is it? Renee is your given name?” he asked. “My daughter has selected you. Do you know what that means?”
“She can't understand you.” Cecilia said.
“Do you accept?” he asked.
“I...” I sputtered. She said to tell him no. “I –”
“She's human, Father. She doesn't understand.”
“Would you love my daughter eternally? Care for her? Be her closest ally, her confidant, her one and only?”
“Father, she –”
“Ye-yes.” I said.
“You would?” he asked, eyebrows raised. He looked over at Cecilia.
“Renee!” she shouted. “Father, she didn't understand. You can't make her... our rules can't apply to her, she's... she's human, and she doesn't even know what you asked her, and...”
“Oh I think she understands.” he said. He smiled and his eyes darted down to my necklace. I think he recognized it. I wonder if he gave it to Cecilia originally. “But I shall ask again. Renee, my daughter has selected you. Do you accept?”
“Tell him no!” she shouted at me.
“Do you love her?” he asked.
“Yes.” I said again, looking down at his feet.
“She means as a friend, Father!” Cecilia shouted. “Renee, tell him you mean –”
“Then it is settled.” he said. He raised his staff. “Please join me in congratulating the happy couple.” he said to the crowd.

There were cheers all around. A couple of people shouted out something about it being unnatural, about it being against nature for her to select a woman. Someone said I wasn't a valid choice because I was human.

“What did you do!” Cecilia shout-whispered. She grabbed my hand and pulled me off the stage, toward the building... the *palace* that lay

beyond it. “You have no idea the trouble we're in now, Renee.”
“What trouble?” I asked.
“I told you to say no!”
“Cil,” I jerked my hand loose from her. We were just inside a set of double doors, in a room roughly the size of New Jersey. “Wow.” I shook my head. “I'm sorry. If you're this upset, just tell him you changed your mind.” I said.

I felt fresh tears welling up. She doesn't want me. I knew that already, but it still hurts. This sucks. I don't like being a pawn in her game.

“It's not that easy.” she said. She covered her face with her hands. “Oh what have I done to you, Renee?”
“I'm fine.”
“No, you're not. You don't get it.” she dropped her hands back to her sides and looked me in the face. “I tried to tell you, this ceremony is for me to select who I will marry.”
“So... we're like, engaged?”

Cool.

“No, it's more than that. This is called a binding ceremony for a reason. We are now bound together. We cannot separate.”
“Like... married?”
“Almost.” she said. “It's weird here. This is like... a trial wedding, sort of. Except if either one of us backs out...” She shuddered.
“Not good?”
“When a commoner backs out of a binding with a royal the commoner can be immediately executed.”
“Not good.” I said. “So you just break up with me, right?”
“I'm the last in my family, Renee. If I do that, I would have to go away in disgrace. My family would lose the throne. There would be a power struggle, probably even more war than what we have now, and people would die. A lot of people.”
“Oh. Not good.”
“Why didn't you just say no?”

Because I love you, Cecilia.

I never had to face that before. I've always pushed it away, certain that I didn't have a chance and that she never would be interested in me. But after that talk with my grandparents earlier got me thinking, and now this, I'm kind of forced to face it.

“I didn't say no because –”
“It doesn't matter.” she said, holding her hand up. “I brought you here, and this is all my responsibility. I'm sorry, Renee. I'm so sorry.”
“Cil,”
“I will figure this out, okay?” she said. She looked so sad. “I will get you back home to your parents. I promise.”
“Wait, I can't go back home?”
“No. You can't leave now. They would send hunters after you.”
“So... I'm trapped here?”
“Until I think of something.”
“But Mom and Dad don't even know where I am.”
“We can get them a note.” She waved a woman in some kind of uniform over. “We need stationery. Now!” she snapped at her. The woman disappeared... *literally*. “You can tell them I had a personal emergency, that my father was dying and I needed you, and you'll be back as soon as possible.”
“They would expect me to call.” I said.
“Tell them... I don't know... just...” the woman reappeared in front of her, holding a stack of paper and an odd pen. “Thank you, Grell.” Cecilia said, taking the paper. “Renee, just tell them my father is in a secret government facility and you aren't allowed to contact them, okay?”
“That's the silliest story of all time.” I said.

Well, that or that I was abducted by a faerie princess.

“They aren't going to believe that.”
“Yes they will.” she said. She waved a guard over. “This is Renee Harris.” she said. “Renee, this is Roth. He can make a very convincing government agent when he delivers the letter.”
“Um...” I said. Well... I guess we can try. “So, uh, how long do you think this –”
“I have no idea.” she said, exasperation clear in her voice. “Look, if we can't figure something out in the next few days I'll... I'll...” She closed her eyes and lowered her head. “I'll give up my claim to the throne and we can leave.”
“Princess, no.” Grell whispered. “It would mean –”
“I know what it would mean.” she whispered. She opened her eyes and looked up at Grell. “Please show... um,” She glanced at me. “Lady Renee to her chambers so she can compose her note in private.” She reached out and grabbed my hand and squeezed. “I'm so sorry, Ren.”
“It's okay.”
“Roth, I want you to wait outside her chambers and when she has finished the note please deliver it to her parents.”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

Grell motioned me toward a large set of doors at the side of the room. I took a step toward them on shaky knees.

“Cil, um,”
“It's okay, Grell will take care of you. Nothing here will hurt you, I promise.”
“Uh... okay.”
“I'll see you in a couple of hours.”
“Sure, okay.” I said, feeling kind of numb at this point.

As we approached the huge wooden doors Grell waved a hand and they rumbled open. Beyond was a winding hallway. The floors were as smooth as glass and made of what looked like crushed gems. The walls and ceiling were wood, and there were no seams. It was like the hallway was just... I don't know, *grown* there, instead of constructed. And it was all lit up in an ethereal glow, but there didn't seem to be any light source, it was just kinda everywhere.

We walked for what seemed like forever down this winding hallway, Grell not saying a word to me. I tried to ask about the floors, but she just looked at me with a stern smile and trudged along until we reached another door on the left side.

“This is your room, milady.” she said, bowing to me. She waved a hand and the door opened. “Please let me know if I may be of assistance.”
“Um, I...” I saw movement in the corner of my eye and turned to see Roth standing there. I had not noticed him following us, and his footsteps made no sound all the way there. Weird. “Um, thank you, um, Grell.”

I went inside and saw that the walls of this room also looked to be grown in place. The door slammed behind me as I was glancing about trying to find the source of the light.

This room had a desk made of a wood that was almost white. A large bed with a canopy made of some kind of silky looking material that had gems inlaid sat against the far wall. There were large stone nightstands next to that. Everything seemed to be very nature-oriented. Kind of... I guess I'd say at harmony? With nature.

Upon the desk was the stationery that Grell had been carrying. I

wonder how she placed that in here without me seeing. I sat on a chair that was shaped like a giant leaf and I wrote my letter. The pen was too big for my hands, really, and it felt awkward. And the paper had a leathery feel to it, but smelled like fresh cut grass.

Everything is so weird in this place.

It took me the better part of an hour – I'd guess(no clocks) – but I finished my letter. I tried waving my hand at the door to open it, thinking it had a sensor somewhere, but it didn't open. I grabbed the knob, but the door was too heavy for me. Finally I pounded on it, and Roth swung it open.

“Yes, Lady Renee?” he asked.
“Um, I... here.” I held the letter up to him.
“Should I have Princess Cecilia review this before delivering it to your parents?” he asked.
“That won't be necessary.” Grell said, appearing suddenly beside him.
“You are to deliver it immediately.” she instructed.
“Milady,” he said to me, dipping a small bow before turning and walking away.
“The king will see you and the princess now.” Grell told me.
“Um... I don't know where Cecilia –”
“She is awaiting you.”

She turned and led me down the hallway, opposite from where we came before. And still there were no seams in the wood, and the light seemed to come from everywhere.

“Grell, can I ask you a personal question?”
“If you wish, milady.” she said, not looking back at me.
“Your wings are very dark, and Cecilia's are very bright. I've noticed there is a variety. But most are bright. Why are yours dark?”
“I am very old, milady.”
“You don't look a day over forty.” I said. Okay, so maybe fifty, but I wasn't going to say that.
“If only that were true.” she said, letting out a sounds that could have been a restrained chuckle. “I have recently passed my four hundred and eighty-seventh year, milady.”
“Four... no way!”
“Yes.”
“But... but that's not possible.”

That's insane! How can someone live that long?

“Milady, if I may, your people tend to be short timers, I'm afraid.”
“So you're saying all people here live as long as you have?”
“We have disease and death by other means, but it is common for our people to live late into their five hundreds.”
“Oh wow.” I swallowed hard. “So, like, how old is the king?”
“Not so old.”
“His wings are dark too.”
“He is very ill. Your eyes cannot see, but there are streaks of red and black in his. This is the sickness.”
“I saw that.”
“Milady, forgive me, but it is unnecessary for you to pretend for my sake. Your people can rarely see our essence, and never in detail.”
“Oh. But... I did see it.”
“You are a strange one, young Lady Renee.” she said with a smile. “We are here.”

She waved her hand toward a door and it opened. Inside was a small lounge area, where Cecilia was seated on a sofa the color of moss. Grell indicated that I should enter, and I did so and took a seat by Cecilia. The door slammed shut.

“How does she do that?” I asked.
“Do what?” Cecilia responded.
“Open and close the doors like that.”
“Oh that.” She sighed and then sucked in a deep breath. She turned toward me. “Renee, in this realm there are many people with certain talents that you may not have encountered before.”
“Like disappearing?”
“Yes, that,” she said, nodding. “Though she didn't really disappear. She just moves so stealthily that your eyes refuse to see her.”
“I don't even understand what that means.” I said.
“Me either, but it's the truth.” she said, laughing. She stood. “Come, it is time.”

She reached out and waited until I took her hand. Okay, so I've held her hand before, like when we were walking on the uneven ground at the fun house at the carnival that one time, but it has never been like this. It feels different now. I mean we're engaged, so I can allow myself to feel it now. Oh my gosh, we're engaged!

“Father.” she said. I hadn't even realized we had gone through another doorway, I was too fixated on our hands. The king was seated behind a huge desk that seemed to be some kind of amber colored wood.

“Please hear me out.”
“Make it short.” he said sternly.
“I tricked Renee into coming here. She had no idea what she was getting into, and it is unfair to force this upon her.”
“And why would you trick her?” he asked, looking up from his papers.
“Because... I don't know! I wasn't ready. I just didn't know what else to do.”
“And you don't love her?”

Her silence was like shoving a dagger into my chest. I tried not to let it show, but I felt the tears welling up. I knew I was just her way out of a stupid predicament, that she didn't think of me the same way I thought of her, but her not even pretending for him hurt. I realized then that I was playing with my necklace again, and I forced myself to stop so they wouldn't think I did it because she meant so much to me.

“She didn't understand a word you were saying out there!” She shouted, after a very long time, slamming her hand down on his desk as she did. “She can't accept something when she doesn't know what you're saying. It's not right.”

His eyes were focused on the hand that she had slammed down. Slowly the burning in his eyes faded and he raised his gaze up to her face.

“I think she understood every word.” he told her. Both of them turned toward me. “Isn't that right, Renee?” he asked.
“Ren?” she asked. Her eyes went wide. “Oh my gosh, you did! You can understand us?”
“Well... I mean you're... speaking English, right?” I said.
“Not even remotely.” she mumbled. “And you understood Grell and Roth, too?” she asked. I nodded.
“You're a gifted young woman, aren't you?” the king said.
“I... um...” I shrugged.
“And she sees things, too.” Cecilia told him. “Our eyes, for one. Even in the human realm.” She turned to me. “Most humans see our lavender eyes as blue.” Then to her father, “And when we got here she saw our essence.”
“Well isn't that interesting?” he said, smiling. “I suppose this will make your life here much easier.”
“She has to go home to her parents. I should not have brought her here.”

“Cecilia, you know the rules.”
“But Father,”
“Enough!” He slammed *his* fist down on the desk, thumping much louder than hers had. “Do you love my daughter?” he asked me.
“I... um...” I took a half step back. “I mean sir, I... Your Majesty... I just _”
“As a friend, Father.” Cecilia said. “When she said that she meant as a friend. We're best friends, of course we love each other. *As friends!*”
“Is this true?” he asked me.
“I... I... we are, um, best friends.” I said. And then quickly added “Sire.”
“What have you done, Cecilia?” he said, sighing. “I will talk to Renee alone for a moment.”
“But Father,”
“Go!” he boomed.

She gave me a glance and a nod, and mouthed “you'll be okay” before leaving the room. He stood from behind the desk as the door closed, and he pointed to the wall behind me, where a chair slid out immediately.

“Relax for a moment, Renee.” he said.
“Um... thanks, Sire.” I sat in the chair.
“Not Sire.” he said. He even smiled a little.
“Um... Sorry. I just... what do I call you?”
“Traditionally in our culture a daughter in law would call me Father.” he said. He smiled. “And since you are soon to be that, I suppose you could use that term, if you chose. Or if you prefer to be more formal, you can call me Your Majesty, or even refer to me as King Tiernan.”
“Yes, Your Majesty.”

He came around the end of his desk and I marveled again at the height of the man. He must be over seven foot tall. And judging from the people I saw before, that must be fairly common here.

“Tell me,” he said, stepping close enough to me that I trembled in fear, hoping he wouldn't hurt me somehow. “What is going on here?”
“I wish I knew.” I managed.
“Let me make a guess.” he said. “My daughter wanted to get out of the binding ceremony, so she dragged you along with the hopes that once she chose you I would disapprove and she'd be free?”
“Yes sir.”
“And if I disapproved, what was her plan for that?”
“She, um, said if I said no then you'd...” I trailed off.

“I would give her time before she had to pick someone else?” he asked. I nodded. “So why did this scheme of yours break down, hm?” he asked, laughing.
“It wasn't a scheme. I mean... well...” I picked at my finger nails. “It was, but I didn't know about everything.”
“Such as?”
“I didn't know what you would ask.”
“I see.” He sat on the edge of the desk and looked at me with a sharp glare. “I could probably make this all go away. I could have another ceremony, declare your binding null and void, with the excuse that you were unaware of our ways. I could do that.”
“Oh thank you, Your Majesty!” I said, looking up at him hopefully.
“I *could* do that.” he said. “But first,” he slid off the desk and squatted down before me, so that we were nearly eye to eye. “You must tell me that you do not love my daughter.”
“But... she said we're best friends.” I protested.
“Ah,” he waved his hand. “Tell me you only love her as a friend.”
“I only love...” I said, and stopped. “I only...” I tried again. “I mean I love her as a friend, but not...”

I couldn't do it. I wanted to, just to make this better for Cecilia, but I couldn't deny my love for her. It was like I was being compelled to tell the truth. And judging from the look the king was giving me, he knew it.

“Interesting.” he said. He stood and started back to his seat on the other side of the desk. “Very interesting.”
“I only –”
“Don't waste my time, Renee.” he said, chuckling. “I suspected as much.”
“You can't tell her!” I said. He suspected? How transparent am I? Good grief! “Please don't”
“Oh I'm not telling her anything,” he said, laughing at me. “But you will.”
“I can't.”
“In time, you will.”
“Please let us out of this binding thingy, sir. She doesn't want it.” She doesn't want *me*. “Please just let her have a little more time. I'm sure she'll be ready to marry one of those men you selected for her.”
“There is not going to be another selection. Not when this one is so perfect.”
“But King Tiernan, she doesn't love... I mean... not like that.”
“Renee, there is much you do not understand, I am afraid.”
“Then tell me!” I demanded. “I mean... I mean please.”

“Oh my dear,” he sighed. “Not even a king can deny true love.”
“But...” I said. He cocked an eyebrow. “I mean... even if it's one sided?”
“Naive child,” he said, laughing at me. “Now go. And send in my daughter, please.”

CHAPTER TWO

I sat in the lounge and waited for Cecilia to finish with him. I guess it is actually an outer waiting room for the king, I suppose. Anyway, she was in his office for a very long time. When she came out her face was covered in tears, and she was moving along like a zombie.

“What happened?” I asked, grabbing onto her and hugging her. “Are you okay?”
“Fine.” she said. She looked into my eyes. “He's moving the date up.”
“What do you mean?”
“Usually there is a year before any wedding must take place.”
“A wedding? Whose getting... I mean... us?” I asked.
“In one month.” she said.
“Why would he move the date up?”
“He said he wanted me to have time to grow into my role before he is gone. He said we didn't need the waiting period, he already could tell we were right for each other.”
“Oh.”
“I'm so sorry Ren.” she said. She began sobbing. “I've kidnapped you, brought you here, and now you're going to be forced to stay here and pretend to be in love with me for the rest of your life.”
“Cecilia,”

I wanted to confess to her right then, but I couldn't form the words. Not with knowing that she doesn't love me as anything more than a friend.

“We'll think of something.” I said instead.
“We have to convince him we aren't in love.” she said strongly. “It isn't a requirement for the binding, but it's the only hope we have of convincing him to let us out of this.”
“Cecilia, I can't pretend...” Can't pretend not to love you. “I mean we can't pretend we're not in love and make any difference because we never pretended to be in love to begin with.”

“Then what do you suggest, Renee? Huh? That we just do this?”
“I don't know. I mean... I mean it could be worse, right?”
“You do understand you'd be giving up your life back home? That the rest of your life you will be stuck being the queen, or... no, that would be me, you'd be the... I don't even know what the hell you'd be! Whatever it is, you'd be forced to live that torture for probably five hundred years, because people live longer in this realm. And you're prepared to do that for these people you don't even know?”
“To spend every day with my best friend?” I said, smiling at her to try to make it seem okay. “Maybe.”
“Ren,” she sighed. “You'd never get to find that true love you write all those poems about. I mean you'd be... it would be cheating on me.” She turned red. “Not that I'd... but you know, technically speaking.”
“And my other choice is to let your family lose the throne and set off a war where thousands will die? Yeah, I could stay here to save those lives.”
“It's probably more like tens of thousands.” she said. She hugged me. “I love you Ren.”
“I love you, Cecilia.” Only a lot more than you love me.

Cecilia called for Grell, who seemed to materialize out of nowhere. I wish I knew how she did that. Cecilia asked her to lead me back to my room for the evening. She promised she would stop in later.

“Grell?” I asked along the way.
“Milady?” she replied, never breaking stride in the seamless wood hallway with funky, all-over lighting. Amazing place.
“Do you speak English?”
“Some.” she responded. “I am learning still.”
“So you understand when I speak? I mean... I guess that's obvious.”
“Milady,” she said. She stopped and looked me in the face. “You are speaking Sheaubairnian.” She began to walk again. “Do you not know this?”
“But I don't know Sheau-whatever-ian!” I protested.
“Yet you speak it well.”
“How?”
“I am a servant.” she told me.
“Meaning what, exactly?”
“I cannot say.”
“Great.” I mumbled.

We came to a door and Grell waved her hand, causing it to open. She indicated for me to go inside, then followed me.

“Milady, you have but to ask if you require anything.”
“Are you leaving me here?” I asked, panicking at the idea.
“Milady.” she said, bowing her head in a nod.
“Um... what... uh...” I glanced around the room. No television. “What should I do?”
“I do not believe His Majesty the king has assigned the lady any official duties as of yet.”
“No, I mean...” I waved my arm around the room. “No television, no books, no anything.”
“You speak of entertainment?” she asked. I nodded. “I do not know of television.” she said. She stepped toward a wall and waved her hand, opening a doorway that showed a fully stocked bookshelf behind it. “Perhaps milady would attempt some local literature?”
“Um... I guess.” I said. Reading. I was hoping for more. “I don't know... can I even read your language?” I asked.
“Perhaps the lady would make an attempt.” she suggested, handing me a book she pulled from the shelf.

I held the book in my hands. It was heavy. Maybe only an inch thick, and roughly notebook sized, but it weighed at least ten pounds. The cover was a leathery looking thing, kind of a leafy texture though, and it was a deep green. No title.

I opened the cover – it opened at the top – and looked down at the first page.

A Brief History of Imperial Poetry

“Hey, I can read this. That's good.”
“Yes, milady.” Grell said, lowering her head again.
“Can I ask you a question?”
“I serve at your pleasure, milady.”
“Um,” What, really? As in she's *my* servant? “how do you open doors that way?”
“It is something I have always done.” she replied.
“How can I open the doors?”
“Milady?” she asked.
“How do I open doors?”
“Milady,” she said. She looked at the cabinet we were standing before. “This door would open with slight pressure against it, just as it would close.”
“But what about the door to the hall?”
“Milady,” she said, giving me a confused look. “If I am not mistaken, there are knobs on doors where you come from, correct?”

“But the doors don't weigh a thousand pounds!” I said.

She gave me a confused look again, then walked to the door to the hall. She glanced from me to it, then stretched her hand out and grasped the handle. She twisted the knob and looked me in the eyes as she easily swung the door wide open.

“How did you do that!?” I shrieked.
“I do not understand, milady.”

I hurried over to where she stood and reached for the doorknob. She quickly pulled her hand back, like she was afraid I'd touch her. Maybe she is a germophobe?

The knob was cold to the touch, and sent a tingling up my arm, but it wasn't painful. I tried to push the door back shut, but it wouldn't budge. I leaned into it, giving all the effort I could muster, but it stood perfectly still in the place that it had begun. I took a step back and threw myself against the door, hurting my shoulder in the process.

It budged.

A little.

I think.

I heard a sound and turned toward her as I rubbed my sore shoulder. Grell was fighting back a smile, a quiet chuckle coming from her mouth as she worked to maintain her serious expression.

“Forgive me, milady.” she said, covering her mouth. “I was not aware you were physically underdeveloped.”
“Hey!”
“I can show you a method I taught my son when he was a child, if you wish.” she volunteered.
“You have a son?”
“I have.”
“Does he work here in the, um,” What do they call this place?
“...palace, as well?” It's so strange to be in any place that could be called a palace.
“No.” she said, her face turning immediately solemn.
“Oh.” I said. And then I couldn't help myself, I continued talking. “Is he dead?” I asked. “Oh I'm so sorry!”
“Sometimes I wish that he were.” she said softly.

Did I understand that correctly? She wishes her son were dead? My gosh, I've heard of someone disappointing their parents, but I can't imagine a mother ever wishing her son were dead.

“You do not know.” she said flatly. “My son leads those who oppose His Majesty, King Tiernan. He would have your family destroyed. My son is misguided. I am a loyal servant, milady.”
“Um... they aren't... my family.” I said.
“Milady,”
“And I am sorry about your son, Grell.”
“Lady Renee, may I speak freely?”
“Always.” I told her.
“The binding ceremony you were a part of earlier makes you a member of King Tiernan's family. You will soon be officially announced as Lady Renee, of...” She paused and looked at me.
“Apologies, milady, but I do not know where you are from.”
“Kansas.” I said.
“Kansas is your village?” she asked.
“State.” I said. “My city is Hanton.”
“Lady Renee, of Hanton, third in line to the throne.”
“Third in... Oh.” I said. “I thought... I mean we have to get married first, right? So that's not official until...”
“By law you must go through the binding ceremony, then consummate the relationship, then you are bound and joined.”
“Consummate?”
“So neither party may claim incompatibility if they do not later provide an heir.” she explained. “That provision has not been enforced since before time.”
“Oh.” I said, feeling my face burn. “Good, I guess.”

My gosh, what in the world have I gotten myself into here? Yes, I'd love to... um, *consummate* with Cecilia.

One day.

I think.

But I can't imagine her actually going through with that. Even to save her kingdom. Or maybe she would, but if it was only because the rules said we had to, which would suck. I don't want to do that with someone who doesn't love me.

“Shall I show you how to open the door?” she asked.

“Yes, please.”
“This may not work for you.” she said. She shoved the door shut. “But we will know soon.”

She grasped the handle and twisted it all the way in one direction, then all the way in the other direction. At that point she slapped the door frame with the flat part of her hand. The door popped open about a foot.

“How did that work?” I asked.
“Many of the latches are quite old. The doors sometimes cooperate, as well.”
“The doors cooperate?” I asked. How can a door cooperate? Is it yet another magic I won't understand? “Ya know what, nevermind. I don't think I can take any more new stuff right now.”
“As you wish.” she said, bowing her head. “Perhaps milady would like to take a nap.”
“I think that sounds like a good idea.”
“I will see to my other duties, then.”

When Grell was gone I went over to the bed. Or what passed as a bed, anyway. It was kind of like a huge, cloth-like blue leaf wrapped around thousands and thousands of smaller leaves. The comforter was another huge leaf, this one a light beige. I was skeptical, but I gripped the edge of the comforter to pull it back and it felt just like regular cloth, as I would have expected back home. And once I climbed in, I realized the bed was very comfortable too. Probably one of the more comfortable places I have ever laid down. The only problem I found was that there was no pillow.

Okay, Renee, you're either having the most vivid dream of all time, or you've somehow been magically transported into a faerie world where everyone has wings and you're betrothed to the only girl you've ever loved. Which is more likely?

Well, I *do know* which is more likely. But since this is obviously a really vivid dream, could it hurt for me to play along with it for a while? Would it be so bad to let my imagination run wild a little, to imagine myself living a faerie tale life with my own real faerie princess? Especially when that princess is Cecilia?

It didn't feel like a dream, though.

And if it was a dream, where was Mom and Dad? They'd be here,

giving me away or something.

--

“Ren,” I heard Cecilia say. I was in that half asleep, dozing in and out phase. “Are you awake?”
“Uh-huh.” I mumbled.
“I need to explain this binding to you.” she said, sighing. “Because I don't know if I'm going to be able to get you out of it.” she added, sniffling.
“Hey, no, stop.” I said. I sat up quickly and scooted to the edge of the bed, next to her. “No crying.”
“Yeah,” she said, nodding and sniffling again. “It doesn't do any good, anyway.”
“Everything is going to be okay.”
“I don't know how you can be so calm about this when you're trapped here because of me.”
“Well if I hadn't opened my big mouth none of this would have happened.”
“I should have never gotten you involved in this. I just knew I didn't want to be with any of those guys. I never thought of the possible consequences for you. I'm so sorry, Renee.”
“It'll be okay.”

I hugged her and we sat like that for a minute. So if this is real – and I'm still not convinced that it is – that would mean I'll never get to see my parents again? I can't believe that. Maybe if I can't go there, they could come here. To visit, at least.

“Why can't I ever go home?”
“People would think you were running away.”
“Couldn't you tell them I wasn't? Like, say I was visiting family?”
“Maybe, in time. But it'll be a very long time before anyone will trust you that much. Or me, for that matter. People already don't trust outsiders very much. Especially humans. And with good reason.”
“Couldn't we go together? Or take guards? Anything?”
“I'm afraid not. If I ever leave then it will cause an uprising, like a power vacuum, and it will go badly. At least once I am in charge. And I don't dare leave again with my father in such bad health.”

He seemed okay to me. Then again, I know nothing of faeries, so maybe he's at death's door. He did have those dark wings.

“Could my parents visit here, then? Like, send... Roth for them,

maybe?"
"Maybe. Once things are settled."
"Good." I said, relaxing. Phew! "That makes me feel much better."
"It may be a very long time before we're ready for that, Renee. It's very abnormal to allow a human here. It was only my insistence that allowed you to be here, and if you were out of my sight during that time it would have been risky."
"Risky how?"
"There are a number of people who do not like outsiders of any kind here."

They don't like outsiders? Well I guess it's a good thing that she didn't leave me alone then. Gosh, If they are strong enough to swing open massive doors, and they have who-knows-what kind of magical abilities, then I wonder what they could have done to me.

"Wait, you're saying I'm stuck here with a large number of people who hate me?"
"Don't worry," she said, placing a hand reassuringly on my shoulder. "I would never, ever let anything happen to you. Ever!"
"But Cecilia,"
"You're one hundred percent safe in the palace. And when you go out you will always have a guard. I promise."

Gee, that's reassuring. Not only does everyone want to kill me, but I'll never have privacy. Yippee.

"Once we're, uh," She pulled away again and looked down at the floor. "...married..." she added, looking like she was going to cry again. "Things will be better then. After a while. They will accept you as a member of the royal family and their leader."
"Cecilia, it's going to be okay." I assured her.
"I'm so sorry, Ren. I wish I could undo this. I would do anything to get you back home."
"Cecilia, I'm okay. It'll be okay."
"I don't know if I can ever make this up to you, but I will never stop trying."
"Listen, this is like a dream to me." I said. "I'm living a fantasy, okay. I get to spend the rest of my life with the girl I..."

With the girl I love so much it hurts. With the girl who doesn't love me the way I do her. With the woman who only cares about me as a close friend, but will never have romantic feelings toward me.

I can't say any of that, though.

“With the girl I always have so much fun with.” I said, forcing a laugh. I nudged her shoulder. “We're going to have a blast!”
“But I kidnapped you, Renee.” she said. “You won't get to get a drivers license, you'll never see your family again, you'll never finish highschool, or –”
“Hey, that's a good thing!”
“I just... I'm so sorry.”
“Don't worry about it.”
“I haven't given up. I will keep trying to fix this, but my father is making it as difficult as he can.”
“He knows this was a scheme to get out of things. He's just making a point to you. He'll change his mind.”

Hopefully. I don't want her to be stuck with me forever.

“He won't change his mind.” she told me. “You don't know him like I do.”
“We'll deal with it, then.” I told her. “Explain this binding to me.”

She hesitated, then took on a serious and business-like tone as she explained their rules and what the laws, which even the king can't ignore, she said. She was trying very hard to force away her emotions and be factual so she could get through things, but every now and then she'd have to stop and close her eyes for a few seconds before continuing.

Apparently there is the binding ceremony, which we did already. At that point the couple spend weeks getting to know each other better. In the past, if a royal chose not to continue at that point then the other person would be released from their binding, if another royal, or possibly imprisoned or executed if a commoner. They haven't imprisoned or executed anyone for a very long time, that was in the brutal medieval times, I guess.

After the binding ceremony and time to get to know each other, usually at the six month mark, the couple undergo another ceremony. At that point, through some kind of magic that even Cecilia doesn't understand, the couple are spiritually bound. From what she says, at that point I would feel a tinge of what she's feeling and she would feel a little of what I feel. So when she was upset or scared I'd know, and likewise.

The reason for this is supposed to be that your spouse and most trusted adviser would be able to counsel and help you when you need it most, and for that would even extend to physical threats. A king who is under physical attack may not be able to call for help, but the queen would feel it as well and could send aid. In some cases this extends to physical well being, too. So if a king were to get very sick his wife would also feel ill, though not to the extent of the king. It also binds your souls together as one, but she had no idea what that really meant.

After they go through the spiritual binding the couple move in together. At that point, they would, um, consummate the relationship.

She very hurriedly explained that provision hasn't been enforced for centuries. Now all that happens is before the wedding they ask if you've been intimate, which means different things to each couple. So the couple – us – wouldn't have to do anything special, it could even just be a very private conversation, as long as they can swear in good conscience that something intimate had happened.

Phew! I just am so *not* ready for that one!

Then they are basically living as a married couple, though not irrevocably. The member of the royal family can still back out and get rid of the other person with no consequence for them physically. They would give up their claim to the throne, but their heirs and family would still retain their status. The commoner would, historically, have to die. That hasn't happened before, she assured me, but it's in the rules.

Six months later there is a wedding, and neither party can ever undo that. Marriage here is forever. It comes with several advantages to the non-royal, including their family all now being considered full royalty and having a claim to the throne, though they would have less of a claim than the direct descendants of a king or queen.

“So if we're supposed to get married in a month, then... I mean when are... when is...” When are we supposed to have our intimate moment? Ugh! “When –”
“My father has scheduled the second ceremony for tomorrow.” she said. She turned to me, animated now. “I'm trying to get him to delay it!”
“Wow.” I said, gulping.

“I'm sorry.”

So we're going to be spiritually bound tomorrow? Oh my gosh! Would that mean she'd be able to tell how I really feel about her at that time? What a disaster!

Or maybe it wouldn't be a disaster. Maybe it would let her know without me having to say it.

I can't say it.

But what then? We're stuck together, and she won't want to be stuck with someone who is in love with her. At least not someone who is in love with her and who she doesn't feel the same about.

She deserves to find someone who she feels that way about too. I have to talk to the king. I have to convince him I am not in love with her so that she can go on with life and find that one person she is supposed to be with.

I hate life.

“So, um, is there any chance at all that I could... I mean... like, maybe I could have a conversation with your father and talk him out of this whole thing. Do you think he'd let me talk to him?”
“I don't think it would do any good.”
“I could at least give it a try.”
“I'll see what I can do.” she told me, sighing. “I'm so sorry.”

She went to try to arrange another meeting between me and the king. I leaned back on the bed, but was wired and couldn't even relax. I tried reading, but that wasn't working out. I could read it, but none of it made sense because my brain was just too rattled.

So how do I do it? How do I convince someone so intimidating that I am not in love with Cecilia, when I'm so very much in love with her? Think Renee! I have to come up with a plan, a way to convince myself I'm not in love with her. Maybe if I think of all the negative things about her.

“What negatives?” I said aloud.

Her eyes are weird. They are purple, for crying out loud!

Except they look really pretty. And I like purple.

She's really serious sometimes. Too serious for me.

Except with all the stuff she has to think about, being serious is a good thing at times. And she looks so cute when she has that serious look on her face.

Her feet stink.

Okay, I'm lying about that one. Her feet do not stink. They actually smell like fresh cut flowers. I always thought it was a lotion she used, but maybe it has something to do with her being a faerie.

I'm hopeless. Even her negatives are cute! How am I ever going to convince him I don't love her when I can't even lie to myself about it?

Ugh!

“Milady,” Grell said through the door.
“Yes?” I said. She slid the door open and entered.
“Princess Cecilia asked that I inform you that you have an audience with His Majesty, King Tiernan early in the morning.”
“Oh.” I said, disappointed. “Not tonight?”
“No, milady.”
“Thank you, Grell.”
“I thought perhaps milady would like a warm drink to calm your nerves before retiring for the night.” she said, holding up a glass that was made of some kind of sparkling crystal.
“Oh.” I took the cup from her. “Thank you.”

I looked down into the glass. There was a blue liquid inside, with a swirling dark streak on the surface. The drink smelled like honey. I raised it up and started to sip, but stopped.

“What is this?”
“Callow root tea with a pinch of norrow oil to help you sleep.”
“Is it safe?” I asked her. I felt silly. “Of course it is, I'm sorry. You wouldn't give me something unsafe.”
“It is perfectly safe, milady.”
“Grell,” I said. I took a sip and it tasted sweet, but had a rich thickness like a syrup, and an undertone of peanut butter. “Do you think you –”
“Pardon the interruption, milady,” she said. “Perhaps you should finish that in the bed.”

“Huh?”
“It is very strong.” she added. And when I was still confused, she added “You may pass out, milady.”
“Oh, right.” I said, lowering the glass. “Good tip. Thank you!”

She did that nod thing again, lowering her head and her eyes.

“Grell, um,” I sat the glass down on the edge of the desk. “Is there a bathroom I could use?”
“A bathroom, milady?”
“I need to use the bathroom.”
“Ah,” she said. “There is a wet room right over here.” she said, indicating an area where there actually was a seam in the wall, though the seam was barely perceptible.
“Thanks.” I said.
“Will that be all for the evening, milady?”
“Um...” All what? Oh, she means do I need anything else. “Yes. Thank you.”
“Sleep well, milady.” she said, before closing the door as she moved quickly from the room in that stealth way she has.

I wish I could get her to call me Renee, but I know if I ask she would tell me it was improper. Who knows, there may even be rules against that kind of thing.

I walked to the door and looked at it. No knob. I tried banging on the wall next to it, like with the door to the hallway, but nothing happened. I kicked it, but that didn't work. I felt all over it, hoping there would be some kind of switch or something, but I didn't find anything. Finally I shoved hard on the door and it swung inward.

Duh.

The bathroom, or wet room, as she called it, was sort of different than anything I've ever seen. It was kind of like the forest had taken over. There was that same white wood as the desk on the walls, floor, and ceiling, but the shower – at least I think it's a shower – had leaves hanging, which it looked like the water would drip from them. There was no floor to the shower, but it seemed to have a drain in the floor. The sink was a huge flower, with more leaves hanging over as the faucet. The cabinet underneath was, once again, the white wood. And there were decorative flowers all about.

And then the toilet. A flower, I think. The seat area was a bright

orange, with some kind of veins running through it. It almost looked like a regular toilet on that part, except there was no tank on the back, or even pipes that water would run through. No flush handle. Even the seat itself was sort of the petals of the flower just curled over, and it didn't look smooth at all. But when I sat on it it felt soft.

I did my business, er-herm, and looked around for toilet paper. No paper to be found. But there was a vine with medium sized leaves that looked like they would do the trick. I was hesitant, but I picked one off and it worked well. And when I stood to pull my pants up I looked down into the toilet and saw the inner lining folding in on itself, a new layer appearing in its place.

Nifty.

Washing my hands was a different story. I wasn't sure how to turn the faucet on. I thought maybe waving my hands underneath would make the water flow, like the hands-free sinks we had at school, but it didn't. I spent two minutes poking and prodding, trying to make water flow, and couldn't figure it out. And purely by accident I stroked along the side of the leaf-faucet area and water began to flow.

Huh.

No soap. Everything here is so different, and I don't know how I'll ever get used to it all. It's all really cool and neat and everything, but there is just so much!

Aha!

There was a differently colored leaf on the wall above the sink. It was sort of reddish-brown, while most of the flowers and leaves were bright and happy. I reached to it, thinking maybe it would dispense some kind of soapy goodness, but when I touched it it was soft and covered in a sliminess. Maybe some kind of sap? I rubbed it on my hands, and noticed as I did that a small amount more oozed onto the surface of the leaf where I had wiped it off.

Very cool.

When I was done with my adventures in the bathroom, I returned to the bedroom and retrieved the drink that Grell brought to me. I sat on the edge of the bed and sipped. I made it halfway through the glass but was feeling so woozy at that point that I sat the glass on the

nightstand and scooted onto the bed. I think I may have stretched out before I fell asleep. I think so.

CHAPTER THREE

I woke to the sound of a light tapping on the door. I was halfway in a dream where I was transported to a faerie world, forced to marry my best friend, and never allowed to go home again.

When I opened my eyes it turned out to be real.

Okay, so I'm going insane, right? Now my dreams have bled into reality and I should just be locked away for the rest of my life.

“Milady, may I come in?” Grell's voice sounded.
“Come in.” I groaned. My head hurt. A lot. “What time is it?”
“Late morning.” she told me. She came to the bedside.
“What time?”
“We don't track the passage of the day as closely as you do in your world.” she said.
“Oh.”

I glanced down at my cell phone. It was dark. I tried the power button, but it wouldn't come on. I don't remember seeing any power outlets around here, either. Not that I have a charger.

“You are expected in the dining suite, milady.” she told me.
“Hm? Oh.” I stretched and climbed from the bed. “I don't suppose I could get someone to pop back to my home and bring my clothes?”
“I believe Lady Renee will be provided a full wardrobe soon.”
“Oh. Um... what will everything look like?”
“The palace has a full dressmaking staff. I'm quite certain they will meet any expectations you may have, within reason.”
“Ah.”

Within reason. Meaning I have to wear what everyone here wears? I actually didn't get much of a look at the ladies fashion up to this point. Grell herself seems to wear long robes in dark colors. Surely I

can get something more girly and young looking. Hopefully.

“Breakfast, milady.” Grell reminded me.
“Right.”

I got up and followed Grell down the seamless hallway again. It was a long walk, and I spent much of it wondering what we'd have for breakfast. Probably not the Honeycombs I like to eat most of the time. Probably not the french toast my mom likes to make, either. Maybe eggs?

“Good morning, Lady Renee.” a tall man with yellow eyes said to me as I entered through huge double doors. “I've taken the liberty to prepare a variety of our traditional breakfast selections for your consideration, along with many juices and drinks.” He indicated a chair at a huge table made from a wood that was colored a dark blue. “If you would be so good to let me know some of your preferences once you try them so that I may prepare them for you on a regular basis.”
“Um, sure. Thank you.” I said.
“Good morning.” Cecilia said. She was already seated across the table from the spot that had been prepared for me.
“Morning.” I said, rubbing my eyes. “So this is real, huh?” I asked.
“Afraid so.” she said, sounding dejected.

Is she really looking at this in such a negative light? Is it so awful that she has to be with me? I'm that hideous? I know she loves me as a friend, but it's becoming very clear that she isn't attracted to me at all. Which sucks. Or in this case, *royally* sucks.

“I'm sorry I wasn't able to stop by and say goodnight.” she said.
“That's okay, I was out pretty quickly. Grell gave me some kind of tea _”
“Ah.” she said, nodding. “Grell's tea is legendary for that.”
“This place is amazing.” I told her.
“You may have to get used to it.” she told me. “I'm so sorry, but I just don't see any way out of this. And my father started assigning me – I guess *us* – duties when I was talking with him last night. Apparently we're supposed to be on some goodwill committee, trying to increase the morale of the public.”
“Not sure how well I'll do at that, considering some of the public probably wants me dead.” I told her.
“Don't worry, they wouldn't dare harm a member of the royal family.”
“Well, don't give up yet, Cecilia.” I said. “When I talk to your father

again I'll convince him to let me go this time, and you won't be stuck with me."
"Which reminds me; he moved your meeting to just before lunch."

Well that stinks. I wonder why he delayed it. Does he go around changing his mind like that? Kind of nutty. He could have at least sent me a text, a snap, a tweet... something! Or I guess sent a messenger, which must be like their version of texts.

My phone is still dead.

"My phone battery died." I told her. "Any chance I could charge it somewhere?"
"Your phone won't work here, Renee. Sorry."
"Well I could at least use it to play some games, even if there's no service."
"It probably stopped working within a few minutes of crossing over." she explained. "That's what happens to computers and other electronics brought here. Not that it matters with no electricity to power anything."
"No electricity?" I asked. "So the lights?"
"Ethereal mist." she said.
"What now?"
"There are caves in the south, along the coast. Strong magic envelopes the whole area, and the mist off the sea floats into the cave and turns into this mixture of magic and fog. It puts off a glow, and we have people who capture this in huge tanks and bring it back. It's piped in through veins in the walls."

Wow. That's nuts.

"I'm not ever going to get used to all this, am I?" I asked. I realized I was playing with my necklace again and stopped. "Assuming you're stuck with me."
"Eventually, I imagine." she said.

So I'm in a giant palace that seems to have been grown in place, rather than constructed. There are faeries. With wings. One of those faeries can disappear before your very eyes. There are giant leaf beds, and woods and plants in colors never before seen. And the bathroom is almost a world of its own.

Oh, and my best friend is a faerie, too.

A princess on top of that. And I'm apparently set to be married to her because of a failed scheme by her to get out of an arranged marriage situation that her father was forcing her into.

Woo-hoo!

“My father isn't doing well this morning.” she mumbled. “He wanted to meet with you before breakfast, and would have been here now, but he's resting.” Tears filled her eyes, but didn't spill out yet. “I really don't think he has a year. That's why he's shortening our timetable.”
“I'm sorry, Cecilia. Maybe someone will be able to do something to help him.”
“I don't think so.” she said. “I should not have been so selfish. I should have come back and chosen one of the men he selected for me and made him happy. Instead I've stressed him out, and probably made things worse.”
“He didn't seem stressed to me.” I told her, before realizing how true that was. He seemed to actually be enjoying our situation.
“I should never have went away in the first place.” she said, sulking.

Cecilia shoved her plate and bowl away, into the center of the table, then called for a servant to bring her more juice. The servant brought more and took away the dishes.

“Go ahead and eat.” she told me. “Try those berries,” she said, indicating the round little fluorescent green and orange swirled things. “They have kind of a honey flavor, along with a little saltiness. Sort of a salty, less crunchy Honeycomb flavor, maybe.” she said, smiling slightly.
“Thanks.” I said.

I popped one of the perfectly round balls in my mouth. It burst when I bit into it, its juices filling my mouth with heavenly flavor.

It.

Was.

Delicious!

OMG! It *did* taste like salty Honeycombs. But the flavor seemed to last and last.

“Ummmmmm!” I purred.

“I knew you'd like it.” she said, laughing a little. “You'll probably like everything except the leafy stuff.” she said, examining the plates before me. “Your anti-salad ways may be a challenge here.” she warned. “There's no Burger King down the road. No burgers at all, actually.”
“How can they not have hamburgers?” I asked, incredulous.
“Well,” she said, sighing once again. She has sighed more since we got here than in all the time I've known her before. “Almost nobody here eats meat more than once or twice a year, and cows don't even exist here.”
“No way!” I said. “Once a year?”
“Yeah.” she said, shrugging.
“Oh wait,” I said, throwing my hands up as dramatically as I could manage. “Nobody told me I'd have to go vegetarian to stay here. I'm out! I'll be heading home now, please.” I said, laughing. But she didn't take it as the joke I meant it as.
“I'm sorry, Renee.” The tears welled in her eyes again, but she once again fought them back. “I've even managed to mess up your favorite meals with all this.”
“Hey,” I said, dropping my hands back down. “If the rest of the food tastes half this good, I'm happy. Don't worry about it, okay?”
“Yeah,” she said, forcing a fake smile. “Okay.”

I dug into the food and all of it other than the leafy stuff was very, very good. Maybe the best I've ever had. I tried the leafy stuff, and some of it was okay, but one bright orange furry leaf thing was almost like spinach, and incredibly gooey and nasty.

“Our, um, spiritual binding takes place just after lunch.” she said. “There will be a gathering.”
“So... I'll have to stand in front of a bunch more people.”
“And speak.” she said, nodding.
“Like when I had to do the presentation during the assembly last year.” I noted.
“Times a thousand.” she told me. “Anyway, we'll have only to reply that we make a commitment to each other and to the crown to always remain faithful and kind to each other, to always support and care for one another, and to always look out for the best interest of the kingdom and all of existence.”
“Sounds like vows at a wedding.”
“Sort of.” she agreed.
“And if we don't agree?” I asked. “If I were to refuse?”
“I honestly don't know.” She told me. “My father wouldn't have you executed, I don't think. But others may do it anyway. Or we could lose

control of the government and the tenuous peace we have with those who are loyal to the crown."

Well that's nice. I wonder how the king could get us out of this. Maybe there really is no way out, and the king was giving me false hope before. I can't believe that. I have to find a way out. I don't want her to be stuck with me forever.

"Lady Renee," Grell said, stepping up beside me and dipping her head. "His Majesty will speak with you now."
"Now?" I asked.
"No Grell, he wants to wait until just before lunch." Cecilia told her.
"Pardon, Princess, King Tiernan just sent me."
"He did?" Cecilia asked. "Good. Let's go, Ren."
"His Majesty will speak only with Lady Renee." Grell informed her.
"Seriously?" I asked.
"Yes, milady."
"I'll walk her to his office." Cecilia said.
"His Majesty will see Lady Renee alone in his personal chambers."

Grell led me through a long serious of hallways, which seemed much like a maze. All were that smooth, seamless wood. There was one section where the hallway widened, and there were seats in front of open windows, which had a light breeze flowing in through them. I could smell a light fragrant... I don't know, *cleanness*.

And then we entered a huge room with seating all around. The sofas looked much like you'd expect any sofa to look, except instead of leather or fabric they were made of leaves. There was a chandelier hanging, made of jewels and crystals. The thing probably weighed a thousand pounds, and had to be seven or eight feet across, and probably would be worth millions back home. The walls had more specks of gems and crystal, and they were covered with overlapping leaves that were a dark maroon shade.

To the side was another hallway, separated from the room by a curtain that was more leaves, and was also encrusted with jewels. The hallway beyond was a rich, chocolatey wood, with a clear crystal layer over the floor. There was a carpet runner down the middle that was made of a soft bamboo-looking substance.

And then we came to a door. Smaller than you'd expect, based on the rest of the palace, but still magnificent. There were intricate carvings on it, depicting several faeries gathered around what was obviously a

new king who was in the process of being crowned. Several of the main characters in the scene appeared to glow. There was a large doorknob along the side, which appeared to be a swirled mix of diamond and ruby.

Grell waved her hand and the door began to open. I sucked in a breath and waited.

And then I saw inside the room. The floor looked like common oak planks, like you might see in any house. The walls were a light white, which was clearly just panels added on separately. There was a very common wood desk, similar to what my dad had in his office, and a bed that looked almost entirely like my bed back home, with the exception of being four times the size.

It looked so very plain and drab compared to the rest of the palace. Even compared to my room back home, honestly. It looked so... cheap.

King Tiernan sat on the side of the bed, staring toward the door. He was wrapped in a robe, which appeared to be some kind of scratchy cotton to me, and had wooden slippers on his feet.

“Come in, Renee.” he said. “You are excused, Grell.”
“Majesty,” she said, bowing her head as she had with me the night before.
“Have a seat, Renee.” he said, patting the bed.
“Uh...” I said.

The door slammed shut behind me, echoing a loud boom in the room. I spun around, surprised that I had somehow moved forward enough for the door to close. I didn't remember walking in.

“You're safe here.” he told me.
“Yes sir.” I mumbled, and sat a couple of feet from him on the edge of the bed.
“You wanted to speak?” he asked.
“Yes, Your Majesty.”
“Please feel free.” he said, smiling.

His smile faded into a hacking cough. The darkness of his wings looked even more obvious today. And there were reddish streaks running through them now.

“You handle that a lot,” he said between coughs. “The necklace.”
“Oh,” I let go of it, letting it drop against my neck. “I guess so.”
“A gift?” he asked.
“For luck.” I said.
“Mm,” he said, coughing again. “Ask my daughter about its origins sometime.” he said, a smile curling his lips.

He bent over in another bout of hacking coughing. It sounded bad. It sounded as if something unnatural was trying to purge itself from within him.

And it was over almost as soon as it had begun. He sat up and swallowed a few times and took a couple of deep breaths and looked fine again, other than slightly pale.

“Please proceed.” he said.
“There has to be another way!” I said too loudly. “I don't want to stay here, I don't want Cecilia to be stuck with me for the rest of her life.” I told him.
“We went through this already.” he told me.
“But –”
“Just tell me you don't love her and I'll make this go away.”
“I d... I...” Why can't I just say it?! Spit it out, Renee! “I doklabla.” I said, trying very hard to actually make myself say I don't love her.
“I don't think that's quite what I asked.” he said, smiling.
“Why can't I just say it!” I shouted at him. And then realized I just yelled at the most powerful person I've ever met. “Sorry for yelling.” I said.
“I understand.” he told me, nodding. “You have a pure soul. I see why this is hard for you.”
“But –”
“You can't say it because you *do* love her.” he said.
“But she doesn't love me!” I said, trying hard not to shout it.
“I find that statement quite interesting.” he said. “Nonetheless, we have a ceremony to attend, and I would like to have lunch first.”

He stood and stepped toward the door. I don't even understand what just happened here. Why can't I just lie and tell him I don't love her? I don't feel like there is a spell on me. But maybe I wouldn't be able to tell.

Assuming I believed in such a thing.

And there really is such a spell.

“If that's all.” he said, swinging the door open for me.
“It's not in the best interest of the kingdom.” I told him. “People here won't like it.”
“I'll be the judge of what is best for my people.” he said, smiling. “But good for you for trying that argument!” he said, laughing. “Very creative.”
“So there's no way out of this?”
“Only one.” he said.
“I don't lalala –” I said, trying hard to force the words out.

His laughing was infuriating. He knew what I wanted to say, but my fumbling the words was humorous to him. Great.

I leaped to my feet and stomped from the room, into the hall with the bamboo rug. There will be a way out of this. There will be!

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“Milady,” Grell shouted after me.

I could hear that she was out of breath from keeping up with me. I stopped and glanced around and realized I had walked quite a ways and had no idea where I was. I spun around to face her.

“If you will please follow me, I will show you to your chambers to dress for lunch and the ceremony that will follow.”
“Fine!” I snapped. And when she jerked back with a hurt expression I added “I'm sorry.”
“Of course.” she said, bowing her head.

She guided me on a very long walk around a mostly deserted hallway. The palace was truly massive. Everything was smooth, seamless, perfect wood. I don't know how they did it, but it was amazing. And where there were any breaks in the wood, for doors and windows mostly, there were amazing trim details that were usually encrusted with some kind of gems.

“I don't have any other clothes.” I mumbled to Grell, just now realizing she said I had to dress for lunch and the ceremony.
“I have chosen an appropriate outfit.” she told me.
“Do I really have to do this, Grell?” I asked.

I felt a panic attack coming on as she stopped abruptly and faced me,

anger in her eyes. Why would she even care?

“Would you dare turn down such an honor?” she asked.
“I don't like being forced.” I told her, trying my best to stand up to her. She was intimidating, though.
“Did you not answer yes when King Tiernan asked?”
“I did, but –”
“How are you forced?” she asked.
“Because I don't want –”
“You lied?”
“No! I just...” She'll never understand. “Never mind.”

She turned her back on me and continued the journey to my room. I wonder what it will be like to be stuck here seventy or eighty years, knowing Cecilia doesn't want me and is forced to be with me.

“Please change quickly.” Grell said, motioning me into my room.
“These ladies will assist you.” she said.

Inside there were two young looking women, maybe only a little older than I am. They were both olive skinned, as most people here are, and incredibly thin and athletic looking.

“Milady,” they said in unison, curtsying. Really? I mean who curtsies these days?
“Hi.” I said, raising my hand and wiggling my fingers.
“Do you wish to shower before dressing, milady?” the one with turquoise hair asked me.
“Um... sure.”
“I will warm the water for you, milady.” the other said, swiftly moving into the attached bathroom.
“Um,” I said, looking around the room. “Are there... *clothes* I'm supposed to be, uh, wearing?” I asked her.
“In our packs, milady.” she said, nodding. “Would you like to see them now?”
“Yes, please.”

She raised one of the bags onto the bed. It was some kind of material I had never seen before, and like many of the items in this palace, it was ornate. The bag was fastened with something that looked similar to velcro, only more natural looking.

When she pulled the rolled cloth from the bag I had no idea what it was or what it even could be. I guess I didn't have the imagination for

it. But as she unrolled it, I gasped in awe.

It was a light lace material, a shimmery white with light purple and orange lace panels loosely draped over it. The shimmery white underneath had what looked like glitter on it, but it was obviously real jewels that had been crushed and painfully attached in a butterfly pattern. And when I reached out a hand to touch, very carefully, it felt as though the material was not even there, and only a wisp of breeze against my hand. I dared to grasp the shoulders, and the girl let go of it. It weighed nothing. Almost, anyway. I stuck my hand inside it, sure it would show right through, but it was entirely opaque. Very thin, yet completely opaque.

“It's beautiful.” I said, hearing the awe in my own voice.
“Only the most beautiful for our fair Lady Renee.” the girl said, doing the same bow thing that Grell does. “By order of Madam Grell.”
“Wow.”
“Your shower is ready, milady.” the other one, the one with brown hair, said.
“Please take care of this for me.” I said, handing the dress back to the turquoise haired girl.

The water was running when I got to the bathroom. I undressed before stepping under the leaves that made up the shower head. I have no idea how they control the temperature, or even turn this thing on and off, but the water was a nearly perfect warm rain that fell over me. I looked around for the soap and found yet another of the slime covered leaves hanging along the edge of the shower. I scrubbed and enjoyed the relaxing heat and thought of how amazing this all really was.

When I got out of the shower there was a towel awaiting me. It was folded neatly on the edge of the sink. It hadn't been there when I went in, which made me feel a little creeped out, but I shook the feeling off. The towel felt almost like real cotton, and was thick and soft and absorbent. It wicked the water away from my body quickly, and I searched for my clothes.

No shirt, no shorts, no shoes, no bra. A fresh panty was there, though. A thong, like I usually wear. It was kind of embarrassing that they knew that about me, actually. I pulled it on and it was a perfect fit. No stretch to it, it just fit right. I barely could tell I had it on. With nothing else to wear, I wrapped the towel around me and stepped into the room.

“Are you ready to get dressed, milady?” the brown haired one asked.
“Um... sure. I just need my bra, and –”
“Oh, that won't be necessary.” the turquoise haired one told me. “Now if you would just drop that towel and slide into...”

She was holding the dress out before her, up where I could slide it over my head. I stepped toward her, but I didn't feel comfortable dropping the towel. I hesitated, and they waited patiently. Finally the brown haired one cleared her throat to get the other's attention, then averted her eyes pointedly. The turquoise haired girl also looked away at that point, and I dropped my towel and slid the dress down over my body.

I could see why no bra. It would look silly, since this thing shows all of my shoulders. The dress fit very tight. Not uncomfortably, though. It had just enough give that I could move, and it really rather felt like a light hug. Only other than that there was nothing. No weight. The dress had to weigh about as much as a couple of kleenex.

“How do you like it?” one of them asked. I was too busy looking down to notice which one.
“It looks gorgeous on you, milady.” the other, I think turquoise hair, said.
“It feels odd.” I said, tugging at it.

It wasn't as if it were too short, exactly, but I had this weird exposed feeling. It actually went just a few inches above my knee, which is perfectly respectable, but it felt so insubstantial because of the weight.

“What fabric is this?”
“It is whisperlace.” she said. “Made from the silk of the whisper moth.”
“Ah.” I said, nodding as if that explained it.
“Shall we do your hair now, milady?” the brown haired one asked.
“Um,” I looked at her and nodded. “But would it be okay if I asked your names?”
“Oh yes, milady.” she said, smiling wide. “I am Kaena.”
“And I am Traadufelisinea.” the turquoise haired one added.
“I'm Renee.” I said, smiling. “Of course you know that.”
“Yes milady.” the brown haired... Kaena said.
“Kaena, and Traadu... um...” I said, feeling like a moron.
“If you'd like, you can call me Traad, milady.” she said, smiling. “It's what my friends call me.”

“Thanks.” I said.

Traad and Kaena sat me in a chair and started working on my hair. I was a little upset. I hadn't even had a chance to see myself in a mirror yet. I know I like the dress and how it makes me feel, but I don't know what it looks like yet.

And when they finished my hair they immediately began applying makeup. So I sat there for the better part of an hour doing nothing other than wondering what in the world I would look like when this was all done. Well, that and listen to Traad and Kaena whisper-gossip about someone named Nat, who apparently was a very attractive man on the rise in the palace guard.

I felt Kaena's fingers on the clasp of my necklace and I grabbed onto it, my heart beating wildly.

“This stays.” I insisted.
“Milady, it's a beautiful necklace.” she said. “But we have another that will go so much better with –”
“No!”
“Milady,”
“I never take this off.” I told her, turning to look her in the eyes.
“Ever.”
“But,”
“Ever!” I snapped. “Got it?”
“Yes, milady.” she said, bowing her head.
“Sorry.” I said, realizing I was being rude in how I spoke to her. “It just means a lot to me.”
“I apologize, milady.” she said.

Great, now I'm being a jerk to the hired help. But there is no chance this necklace is coming off. It means more to me than anything. Plus it's the only thing I have now from my normal life.

“Here are your shoes, milady.” Kaena said, setting them down before me. “I'm certain they will fit well.” she said.
“Thank you.”

The shoes looked like pure crystal, with hints of purple and orange gems attached all around. And they fit as well as the dress did. I was completely convinced that they would pinch my toes, or hurt my feet in some way, but they didn't. I don't usually wear heels quite as high as the five inches they were, but standing in them was comfortable

and easy.

“Cool!” I exclaimed.
“Would you like a jacket?” Traad asked.
“Oh Traad,” Kaena said, giggling. “That's just human slang.”
“Oh.” she said, looking confused.
“I just mean they are very nice.” I said, smiling.

Traad stepped to the wall and pushed on it. I was about to ask what she was doing, but just then the wall swiveled at that spot and I was faced with a full length reflection of myself. Or at least I think it was me.

“Oh my gosh!” I shouted. “Wow!”

First of all, I looked ten pounds thinner, which is great just by itself. I love this dress for that. If all the clothes here do that then I can down chocolate like there's no tomorrow!

If they have chocolate.

I looked so... regal, or something. My hair was curled and flowing, and they had somehow attached tiny crystals all throughout, which gave a sparkle to the sandy color my hair is.

The makeup was amazing. Perfect. I had rosy cheeks, but didn't look like I was overdoing it, and the lipstick was a perfect shimmery line covering my lips. The eye shadow was a dark grape, and blended perfectly into the lighter color on my upper inner eye. And the eye liner looked like an exact line, not a single wiggle or smudge. These girls are perfectionists. But to top it all off, my whole face had this light glow from some shimmery powder they had put on me.

“You girls work miracles.” I said.
“You were easy, milady.” Traad said. “We rarely get to work on subjects as beautiful as you are.”
“Um,” I not only felt myself blushing, but actually saw it in the mirror. “Thanks.”
“I am certain that His Majesty, King Tiernan, and Princess Cecilia are already awaiting you, milady.” Kaena told me. “If you are ready?”
“I... guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be.”

CHAPTER FOUR

I had two thoughts filling my head the entire time as I followed the two girls down the hallway. First, *I don't want to do this!*. Second, *I look freakin' hot right now!*

“Your Majesty,” Kaena said through a doorway. I couldn't see, but I'm guessing the king was in there. “Lady Renee is here.” she said, bowing.
“Show her in.” he told her.
“Milady,” Kaena said, stepping aside and nodding.
“Thanks.” I told her.

And then I froze.

Okay, so this is it. No going back. If I step through that door I get to spend the rest of my life with Cecilia, but maybe never see my parents again. If I turn and run down the hallway – at least if I *can* run in these shoes – I'll probably be executed. If I go in I doom Cecilia to never finding the one she belongs with. If I run, I die and could even cause a political backlash that would lead to the overthrow of the monarchy, a civil war and thousands of deaths.

I sucked in my breath and stepped... back. I bumped into Traad, who was too busy apologizing to notice that she was blocking my way. And then I stepped toward the door and hesitated again.

“King Tiernen,” I said out loud, though who knows if he could hear me from where I stood “I don't lo... luuuuf... la...”

Well poop! I still can't say it, even when I'm not facing him. Guess I'm stuck. I stepped into the room.

“What was that, Renee?” he asked.
“I... uh...”

I was too busy looking at Cecilia to even concentrate. She was in a dress just like mine, but she rocked it so much better! She was gorgeous! I almost couldn't breathe. It was like one of those times when you see something so beautiful that it actually hurts your eyes.

No wait, that's an eyelash.

“I um,” I stammered, plucking the lash from my left eye. “I don't like keeping you waiting.” I said lamely.
“We weren't waiting long.” he said, giving me a warm smile. “Are you alright?”
“Yes.” I said, making a dramatic show of flicking aside the eyelash I had just pulled from my eye. “Thank you.”
“Hi.” Cecilia squeaked.

She was so nervous. Her eyes kept darting to me, then she'd look away quickly. This whole thing was embarrassing for her, too. I could tell by the way she was blushing that she hated this and felt bad for being responsible for me being here. Of course if I had said no to her father this would never have gotten this far, so I'm the one to blame.

“Shall we?” King Tiernan asked, extending an arm to each of us.

I looped my arm through his and tried not to vomit on him. It wouldn't do to puke on the king. I imagine that would violate some royal code or something.

A wide doorway spread open and I could see out into a grand hall, with maybe five hundred people... um, faeries, seated in rows around a small table. There were several servants with trays on carts around the table. They all spun toward us and there was a collective gasp as they saw us. For some reason all of their wings – aura's, life-force, whatever – shifted slightly in color toward a light green.

“His Majesty, King Tiernan, Her Highness Cecilia and her beloved Lady Renee.” a voice boomed.

Beloved? I guess they have to say that. Sort of to keep the charade up. Though honestly, will people really believe that in the long run? They will eventually see that she doesn't love me like that.

The king led us forward, into the room, and my lungs stopped working. They just refused to fill. And as we approached the table,

King Tiernan leaned close to me.

“Take a breath, Renee.” he whispered, chuckling.

I sucked in a deep breath, then panted it out. I hope nobody heard that. Gosh, everyone here looks so confused by my being here.

I'm with them!

“Milady,” a voice sounded. I glanced up and between the spots I was seeing could see a costumed servant, decked in a shiny and frilly long coat, hold a chair for me, his shiny green wings protruding through the coat.
“Thanks.” I muttered to him.

I plopped into the chair, grateful it was there because I felt weak and as though I may pass out if I didn't sit.

But the second my butt hit the seat I felt a sudden panic. Was I supposed to wait for the king to sit first? I'm not well versed on how you treat a monarch, but it seemed like it would be frowned upon if I were to do something wrong and insult him.

Fortunately I saw Cecilia was also seated already, and the king didn't look upset in the least. He was smiling broadly at us both.

“A toast,” King Tiernen said, holding a large mug out to the middle of the table. “May my daughter and her lover lead a long and happy life together, ushering this land forward into a safe and peaceful time for all.”

Lover?

I can't believe he just said that. I've never even kissed anyone and he is calling me Cecilia's lover. I must be beet red right now.

“O-ya!” the crowd chorused, though some seemed less than eager about it.

The king nodded toward our mugs, much smaller than his, indicating we should drink as well. Our mugs were some kind of sparkling pink crystal with what looked like real vines somehow attached in a pattern around the base and handle. When I sipped at the shiny, metallic looking liquid I was surprised. It tasted like cotton candy, sort

of, but with a carbonated feel to it and a citrus undertone. It was very good.

“In honor of our new family member,” the king said. “I have asked that a special meal be prepared for this occasion.”

The servants around us removed the top – I think it's called a cloche – from the huge serving trays. Plates made of some kind of plastic-y looking wood, were laid before us, along with silverware that had a weird glowy translucence to them.

“I believe this is what is called *french fries*.” he said, smiling.

Cecilia laughed.

Yes, french fries. Actual potatoes sliced into thin shoestring fries. At least they looked like actual potatoes. There was even ketchup. Of course there was some kind of weird salad alongside it, which I would *never* eat with fries, but I appreciate the effort.

It was very weird to sit there before the crowd and eat. I picked up the fork and poked at one fry, dipping it into the ketchup and raising it toward my mouth. It tasted like any french fry would taste. Which is to say wonderful! I scarfed the fries, feeling strange for eating so quickly and yet unable to stop. And then I picked at the salad for a while. It was good, too, though not as good as the fries. There were some vegetables in it that I couldn't identify, but they tasted good and had a rich flavor.

For dessert they brought us an orange flavored ice-cream that was actually a dark sage green color. I didn't have high expectations for it, but it tasted citrus-like and as tangy as a ripe orange.

I had been trying very hard not to think of the hundreds of eyes on me while I was eating, but when I finished I could feel the weight of each. I looked up into the crowd and realized there were a few who were not faeries. Not human, either. A couple had almost reptilian skin that was a dark muddy green color. There were at least two who were large and muscular with reddish skin. None of these had the wing-aura things.

“Ladies,” the king said, extending a hand to each of us.

He stood and waited for us, but then pulled back as he fell into a

coughing fit and had to sit back in his chair. A servant rushed out with a cup with something that reeked within. The king swallowed it down and closed his eyes. I glanced over to Cecilia and she was looking on with concern.

And then he stood and once again extended his hands toward us. Cecilia smiled up at her father, then reached out to take his hand. I followed suit, and the king stepped toward Cecilia, gently tugging me along with him as we circled the table back to the front side.

“It is my honor to preside over the spiritual binding of this beautiful young couple.” he announced to the crowd. There was cheering, though again some were less than enthusiastic with their cheers. “Please face each other.” he told us.

Well, here it is. Our last chance to back out. The last opportunity for Cecilia to be free of me.

Ooh, I know!

“King Tiernan,” I whispered. He looked and me, then leaned in. “I'm not eighteen yet.” I told him.
“This concerns you?” he asked softly, smiling.
“It's not legal without parental permission.” I argued. “We'll have to wait.”
“Ah,” he said, laughing now. “We are not bound by human rules here, but I have considered this already.”

He waved his hand and a man stepped forward. Roth. He approached up the center of the room toward us, stopping several feet in front of the king.

“Please report.” King Tiernan said.
“Your Majesty,” Roth said, with a nod. “As you requested, I had a discussion with Lady Renee's parents.”
“*My* parents?!” I interrupted.
“Er, yes, Lady Renee,” he said, looking at me, then back to the king. “I apprised them of the situation.”
“Bet that went well.” I mumbled. I heard Cecilia laugh softly.
“And how did they respond, Roth?” King Tiernan asked.
“They were skeptical at first, Your Majesty.” he said. “But I was able to convince them that this was all indeed true.”
“Excellent!” the king said, smiling.
“They wished me to pass along their best wishes to Lady Renee and

Princess Cecilia, and they welcome the princess to their family."
"What!" I said loudly, just short of a shout.
"You were able to attain their consent, then?" the king asked.
"Yes, Your Majesty. They also asked me to relay to Lady Renee that they will miss her and hope she can come visit soon."
"This is unreal." I said softly.
"No kidding." Cecilia added.
"Thank you Roth." King Tiernan said.

Roth bowed to the king, then turned toward Cecilia and did the same, then to me. With that, Roth turned and marched away from us, leaving me standing there in shock.

My parents gave the okay.

Well doesn't that suck!

"How did you know to ask?" I asked, not looking up and not bothering to whisper.
"Ah!" the king said. "I've learned a great deal about human culture. I anticipated this concern."

I couldn't even argue, I just nodded. He sent someone to talk to my parents. Well, at least they know where I'm at. Sort of, anyway. I miss them. Why can't they be here.

"Are you prepared to continue?" he asked me. I nodded and he turned toward Cecilia, who looked as confused as I felt, but she nodded. "Let us continue." he said. "Princess Cecilia, do you commit yourself to Renee? Do you take an oath to always remain faithful and kind to her? Will you always support and care for her? Will you always, together with her, protect and defend the crown and work in the best interest of the kingdom and all of existence?" Cecilia opened her mouth to respond, but he continued, "Do you promise to love, honor, and cherish her until death?"

Her eyes went wide at that last part, as if she hadn't expected it. After a moment she looked down to me, then back to him. She nodded, and he gave her a look that let her know she had to answer out loud.

"Yes," she said, her voice shaky. "I commit and promise to do so."
"Renee," he then said, squeezing my hand and smiling at me. He has a very calming smile when he wants to. "Do you commit yourself to Princess Cecilia? Do you take an oath to always remain faithful and

kind to her? Will you always support and care for her? Will you always, together with her, protect and defend the crown and work in the best interest of the kingdom and all of existence? Do you promise to love, honor, and cherish her until death?"

I wanted to say I didn't. I wanted to lift the burden from her, even if it cost me my life. I wanted so much to set her free from this horrible situation that we were in, the trap that she and I accidentally set for her.

I felt as though I would pass out, and I actually swayed on my feet. So this is it. This is my wedding. Of sorts, anyway.

"Yes," I mumbled in a squeaky voice, then followed her lead. "I commit and promise to do so."
"Very good." he said, his kind smile broadening even further.

He waved a woman forward, toward us. She was carrying a small glass bowl containing a gray liquid that was gurgling as though it were boiling. She held it up toward him, as if presenting it. He reached out and took it from her and bowed deeply. She nodded and backed away from us.

"Cecilia, in drinking of this you complete the binding process, forever more entwining your spirit and your soul with that of Renee." he said.

He held it out toward her. She gave me a look filled with an apology, then leaned forward as he raised the small bowl to her mouth and tipped it up. When she had finished sipping, he bowed to her and she bowed to him.

"Renee," he said, turning to me. "In drinking of this you complete the binding process, forever more entwining your spirit and your soul with that of Cecilia."

He held it out toward me as he had her. I didn't want to do it, but it was as if my body was acting on it's own. Like he had compelled me, somehow, I suppose. I leaned forward and sipped from the bowl, then bowed to him as Cecilia had.

And I almost immediately felt something. Fear. Panic. Sorrow. Also joy and happiness. The fear, panic and sorrow were my own *and* Cecilia's. I could feel them coming from her. I also was afraid, but a part of me also felt great joy and happiness.

This is so confusing.

“This is the part where usually the couple would be congratulated,” King Tiernan said, looking around the room. “But there is a human tradition that they use during their wedding ceremonies that I think applies here.” he said, laughing. He looked down to both of us. “You may each kiss your bride.”
“Father!” Cecilia said, turning red. I could feel my face burning, as well.
“Too public?” he said, laughing. “Okay, we can skip that part until the actual wedding.” He did grab our hands and move them toward each other until we took each others hand. “Presenting Princess Cecilia of Sheaubairn and Lady Renee of Hanton.”

There were cheers and clapping, this time mostly enthusiastic. I felt so embarrassed. Cecilia looked as nervous as I was.

She's mine forever, though. I love her.

As if on cue she turned quickly and stared at me as I thought that. Was she able to tell what I was feeling?

Oh poop!

“The young couple will have a few days to celebrate, then will take up their official duties as goodwill ambassadors to the public. More information will be forthcoming on this soon. And now I bid you all good day. Bless each of you, and may our glorious kingdom forever endure.”

There was applause again. I felt so tiny, being the center of this much attention. And scared.

What have I really gotten myself into?

Poor Cecilia.

We followed King Tiernan from the room, back into the small area where they had been waiting for me before this ceremony. I could feel dread radiating from Cecilia.

“I'm so sorry, Renee.” she mumbled to me.
“Sorry!” the king boomed. “This of the start of a new life. Who better

to spend it with than you, my wonderful daughter?"

He clapped me on the back and nodded, then followed guards from the room and down the hallway.

"Princess," Grell asked. Cecilia turned to her. "Am I to remain in the service of Lady Renee?"
"Would you like that?" Cecilia asked her.
"If Lady Renee would allow."
"Of course." I said, not waiting to be asked.
"Very well." Cecilia said, nodding. "Grell, perhaps you would show us to our, um," Cecilia glanced at me and a spark of panic hit me from her direction. "Our suite." she finished.

Grell did her nod-bow thing, then turned and led us from the room. I hesitated, just a *bit* overwhelmed. Cecilia stepped forward, then turned and beckoned me to follow with an apologetic look.

Grell led us to a hallway I had never seen before. Not that I've seen much, I guess. But this wasn't the typical light wood like the other hallways. For one, the walls were a dark pink. It was still seamless wood, other than all the windows, which let in the only lighting. There were many, and they opened into a courtyard that was small and surrounded on all sides by other parts of the palace.

The palace. My new home, it seems.

"You're going to be okay." Cecilia said, obviously sensing how sick to my stomach I was feeling. "I promise you will, somehow."

I paused and looked out into the courtyard. The flowers were light and spaced out along the entire pathway, which led in a zig-zag pattern and was covered in orange tinted stones. There were benches, which seemed to grow up from the ground, and a beautiful water fountain in the middle that had a large base made of the same orange stone. There was a massive flower sticking at least ten feet into the air, with the water cascading over the petals and into the base below. It was beautiful.

"My oasis." Cecilia said. "My mother created this before she died. She loved it too. I sometimes sit out there when I want to be alone. The servants know to leave me alone when I'm there."
"It seems like a very serene place." I said.
"The fountain lights up in different colors at night."

“Sounds nice.” I said, hesitating before continuing. “Will, um, our... will we have a window to see this?”
“Your suite is on the outer wall.” Grell said, making me jump. I hadn't heard her return. “Your windows will look out on the front courtyard, milady.”
“Oh.” Well that stinks. I guess. I didn't get a good look at the front courtyard yet, it may be beautiful. “Grell, do you think you could just call me Renee?”
“As you wish, Lady Renee.”
“Uh...” I mumbled. Cecilia laughed. “Thanks.”

We followed Grell along the hallway to a massive door with two servants seated at a desk next to it. They immediately jumped to their feet as they saw us approach.

“Good afternoon, Your Highnesses.” one of them said.
“Hi. You're prettier than I expected.” the other one said, giggling like a child as she looked at me. The other swatted her as Grell glared at her.
“I apologize, Your Highness.” she said, bowing deeply.
“I will speak to you about this later.” Grell said in a scolding tone.
“It's okay, Grell.” Cecilia said. “Most of us have that reaction when we first meet Renee.”

Cecilia turned red when she said that, and I felt her embarrassment through our connection. Still, what she said came across as quite the compliment to me, even if it wasn't what she meant.

“We're pretty relaxed.” Cecilia continued. “As long as you try to be respectful and act properly if we have guests or if my father comes around then we're going to get along great.”
“Yeah,” I added. “Please just treat me like you'd treat... um, a friend, or something.” I said.
“Thank you, Lady Renee. I'm Sina.” the giggling girl said.

When I extended my hand to her she stared down at it and her eyes filled with fright. Grell looked shocked, as did the other servant. And from Cecilia I could feel a kind of amusement and some kind of warm feeling that I couldn't identify.

“Milady,” she said, bowing, then taking my hand.
“It's a pleasure to meet you, Sina.” I said, shaking her hand.
“The pleasure is mine.” she replied.
“Milady,” the other servant said, stepping forward and extending her hand. “I am Parthesoon. I am glad Princess Cecilia selected you, and I

pledge to do everything I can to make you comfortable here as you settle in."
"Thank you Parthesoon." I said, hoping I pronounced that correctly.

Sina (who was once again giggling, for some reason) stepped to the huge door and opened it wide for us. Grell poked her head in and glanced around, then looked back at Cecilia and I.

"Milady," Grell said, bowing to me. "The workers have completed their preparations. I trust you will find your suite to your liking. If you should need anything, please just send for me."
"Thank you, Grell." I said, glancing sideways at Cecilia. I expected her to be the one Grell spoke to, since she's the princess here.
"If I may take my leave, I will see the kitchen about your dinner. I assume Your Highnesses will want to dine in?"
"Um,"
"Thank you, Grell." Cecilia said. "Yes."

Grell bowed, then stepped aside and let us enter the room. We entered into a big living room area. There were several giant sofas, all poofy and made of various suede leather-looking material of all the colors of an autumn forest. There were stems still attached on the edges in some places, so the material was from some kind of gigantic leaves.

The walls were covered in some kind of wall paper, but instead of resembling a natural or forest area as most of this palace did, two of the walls were actually decorated in what looked like a village with several small huts, and the windows even glowed and flickered as if there were fires raging inside.

The ceiling was a darker color, and it had inlaid gems that sparkled like the stars, though none of the constellations matched with what I remember from back home. The floor looked exactly like water. I don't know how they pulled it off. I was afraid to step in, sure that my feet would get wet. But we stepped inside, and our feet remained dry.

"O.M.G." I said.
"It is very nice." Cecilia agreed.
"How did they do this floor?" I asked.

I bent forward and felt the floor, which had a stone texture. There was a rug next to me, colored a dirt brown and resembling an island among the sea that was the floor. It looked like a dense rug that you'd expect in any living room, other than the ragged shape that made up

the shore line, and it felt like...

“Cotton?” I asked Cecilia. I stood. “There is cotton here?”
“Of course.” she said, smiling.
“I just figured...” I said, waving my hand around the room. “Wood, leaves, but... well, ya know?”
“No *real* fabrics?” she asked, with a laugh. “Oh Ren, this place is very different than your home. I'm so sorry. But it's not that different in a lot of ways. We have fabrics of all kinds, as long as they are natural.”
“Cotton?” I asked. She nodded. “Wool?”
“A variation.” she said. “The closest thing to sheep here have a scratchy fur that is used to make some low end products. You won't find any in the palace, I imagine. There are a couple of shops which sell it in Shailmeya. That's the capital village, just over the hill. There are shops there which cater to the factory workers.”
“They don't have to kill the animal to get it, do they?” I asked.
“No!” she said. I could feel a bit of fear come off of her. “The gamleh is a protected species, Renee. It is forbidden to kill one.”
“Are they endangered?” I asked.
“They were. The only ones around now are on farms. There really aren't that many. The only thing that makes their fur useful is that they can be trimmed once a month. It grows faster than bamboo.”
“Silk?”
“Kind of. But no nylons, no rayons, no polyester. Nothing synthetic at all.”
“How can this place be so similar to... to Earth?” I asked.

I sat on one of the sofas. Very soft. I sank in and felt like I was getting a nice soft hug. Cecilia smiled and sat next to me.

“You seem okay.” she said. “Are you doing okay?”
“I guess you could tell if I wasn't.” I said. I hope she can't feel everything I'm feeling or this will get really awkward soon when she realizes how I feel about her.
“I'm still having a hard time interpreting what I'm feeling.” she mumbled. “Or at least what I feel that is coming from you.”
“Well I guess you have maybe seventy years to figure it out.” I said.
“Seventy?” she asked.
“Unless you can figure a way out of this before then. This spirit binding thing stops when I die, right?”
“Renee,” she said, once again sending all kind of sad feelings my way. “I'm afraid it's going to be much longer than that. People live a lot longer here.”
“But I'm not a faerie.” I reminded her.

“Yes, but –”
“Wait, you're saying *I* will live five hundred years, like Grell?”

How is that possible? No way. This can't be.

“Maybe not that long, maybe less.” she said. “You spent a lot of years in the human world, so who knows how much that shortened your life.”

A new wave of guilt washed over her. I know, because I could feel it. She was thinking again about how she got me into this. If only she knew the truth.

But I have to stop thinking like that. One of these days she's going to figure out the confused feelings I'm sending her way, and then it's going to ruin everything. Instead of being stuck with her friend she'll be stuck with a girl who is in love with her who she doesn't love back. I can't take hundreds of years of her avoiding me and feeling awkward. I just can't. And I'd die from embarrassment if she knew.

“Unreal.” I said. “But how is that? I'm human, so it can't be true.”
“Humans and faeries aren't that different. We're evolutionary cousins, really.”
“Huh? How?”
“Faeries, elves, orcs and a bunch of other races you think of as mythical are all the same. They started the same. They evolved differently afterward, but they started as one group. We lived both here and in the human world.”
“So, uh,” This is insane. “What happened, then?”
“Early humans were the very aggressive and ambitious ones, but also very paranoid. They attacked and drove away anyone outside of their own group. Meanwhile other groups became peaceful and nature loving, like the group who became the faeries and elves, and others became as aggressive as the humans, but didn't develop the capacity to create the technology and couldn't organize and get along as well together, which were the orcs. And still others developed in many other ways.”
“I'm not sure I want to know this.”I said, shaking my head.
“I know it's a lot to take in. I'm so sorry. We don't need to talk about that any more right now.”

She stood and walked toward the only door other than the entry we came in. I followed, curious what else I'd find.

A bedroom.

An exquisite bedroom, with cream colored walls and beige curtains and an honest to goodness normal looking bed! It almost resembled a bedroom back home.

“They did this for me?” I asked. “How sweet!”
“I told them to make you feel at home.” she said, a wave of pride washing off of her.
“Thank you!” I told her. “Where's your room?”

Sudden panic filled the air. First hers, then mine in reaction. I could feel it rolling toward me in wave after wave. But I didn't need any of that, I could see it on her face.

“This is *our* room, isn't it?” I asked.
“Yes.” she mumbled.

And then I really did panic. I'm sharing a bedroom with her. How in the world am I supposed to keep my feelings for her a secret when I spend every moment with her?

“Sorry.” She said.
“I assume that's the bathroom?” I asked, indicating the door on the opposite wall.

I went into the room and looked around. The bathroom was almost like the one in my previous room. The only exception was a long counter running alongside the vanity, and a larger mirror. Oh, and a door at the end opposite the shower that led to an empty closet.

“So, um,” I said, returning to the bedroom. “What do we do now?”

Her eyes flicked to the bed and she turned a deep shade of red. She was once again radiating embarrassment and shame.

“Would you like a tour?” she asked. “I could show you around the palace and the grounds outside.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“This is the lowest point in the wall.” she said, staring up at a section that was close to ten feet high. “Eventually it will reach the height of the rest, but for now we keep it well guarded on the outside.”

She had shown me around most of the inside of the palace, which had taken more than an hour and didn't yield anything surprising or vastly different than the parts that I had already seen. Beautiful, amazing, and wonderful, but very similar to what I had seen. At least the part she showed me.

We then proceeded to the grounds, which *were* amazing and different. There was very little here that seemed real to me. Plants and trees that looked alien. Some had stems that were no bigger than my finger, yet stretched forty feet into the sky and had multiple flowers dangling from them, some larger than the dining room table back home. There were trees that stretched so far into the sky that I couldn't see the tops, and they were all various shades that didn't look natural or possible.

The insects were also very different. Kind of scary different. There were large butterflies, some with six wings, all bigger than my hand, and some as large as birds. Very delicate, though, and completely harmless according to Cecilia.

We came across a swarm of flies that were fire red. Usually red is a bad thing when it comes to insects, but Cecilia explained that these flies always avoid people as much as possible, and they usually eat the, er, *waste* from other animals. And apparently the lighting inside the palace itself scares them off, so they never come inside.

There were bees in a flower bed near the low spot in the wall. They were huge, probably about two inches long, but Cecilia said they were very docile, and it was almost impossible to get one to sting you. She

said she had been stung as a child, when she grabbed one, but it barely hurt. I guess it's kind of like a sweat bee sting, from what she described. And I couldn't even see a stinger, so I believe her.

I also saw some more of the lime green birds with four wings. They were swooping in, trying to catch the flies in mid flight. They didn't look to be particularly successful, but they were trying very hard. It actually kind of looked like a game to them, like they were enjoying it. Weird, but that's what it looked like to me.

“We should get back.” Cecilia said. “It will be dinner time soon.”
“Sounds good, I'm starved.”

Cecilia had ordered all the servants to leave us alone, but she waved Sina, who had been waiting at the entrance to the palace, over to us.

“Please see Lady Renee back to our suite.” she ordered.
“Wait,” I said, nervous about her leaving me alone again.
“I'm just going to check in on my father before coming to our suite for the evening.” she assured me. “I shouldn't be long.”

I nodded. I wanted to ask to tag along, but she clearly wanted some time alone with her father. Or away from me. I need to find a way to give her space away from me. I have to make it okay that she continue to be just my friend. She isn't my girlfriend, my fiance or wife or whatever. I only wish. She is just a best friend who happens to be stuck with me for the next several hundred years.

Wow, that's a long time!

Sina led me back to our suite and I went inside and laid on the bed. Bored silly. I didn't even see any books. Maybe one of the servants will be able to help out.

“Hi.” I said, stepping out through our outer door.
“Oh!” they both said, quickly jumping up.
“Yes, milady?” Parthesoon said.
“I'm just wondering if there is something... a, uh, magazine, or maybe a romance novel or something around that I can –”
“I have a newsprint, Lady Renee.” Sina said, reaching into the desk. “Would that interest you, milady?”
“Uh, sure.” I said, reaching out for it. “Thank you so much.”
“My pleasure, Highness.” she said, bowing her head and giggling.

I returned to the living room and sat on the sofa, spreading the small newspaper out before me. It was laid out differently, but it was very much like any newspaper back home, with a headline and cover story and everything.

Guess what the cover story was?

Yeah, me and Cecilia. I don't know where they got the picture of me, but it looks like something from my mom's scrapbooks. If I were to guess, I'd say it was one weekend when we were heading to church with my grandparents last summer. I look a little younger, and I think I recognize that scarf I have on.

I hate pictures of me.

Apparently I'm just the innocent girl – decent student, community volunteer, doting daughter, avid art fan – who managed to inadvertently enchant the royal princess.

Uh-huh.

I guess I am a decent student. Not amazingly great, but decent. Community volunteer, though? I helped with a charity fundraiser *once*. Doting daughter? I mean I think my parents are great, but I wouldn't say I was ever doting. Avid art fan? Um... if you say so. The only art I'm avid about is music and movies. I like art, but I've never really concentrated on it a lot.

Where do they get this crap?

The whole story made me sound like a perfect little angel. It's like Cecilia couldn't help but fall in love with me, that I'm just that irresistible. I only wish that were true, but it's not. She has no romantic feelings for me at all, we're just best friends who tried to beat the system and found ourselves trapped.

I don't know why it was necessary for this bunch of lies to be printed. It's yesterday's paper, so it was right after we got here. Maybe getting any story was better than waiting for the facts. Or maybe they got caught up in the fact that their princess had returned and had gone through the first stage of her binding ceremony.

Only now we've gone through the second stage, too. Now we're stuck. And now I can feel anxiety coming from Cecilia, wherever she is.

But the news story... if they only knew the truth. I wonder if we could somehow use that to our advantage? Somehow get this whole thing reversed so that Cecilia can be free.

It would never work.

On page two there was a story about a rebel uprising in the south. It sounds like it has been going on for a while. This time they struck an armory in Vaibecho-Staes, a small town near the southern border. The Sheaubairnian military chased them off, but they escaped across the border into the mountainous orc territory, where the troops wouldn't dare follow.

In the north the regional championship was held for lacta, which sounds like some kind of sport. Apparently there will be a kingdom-wide championship tournament that will be here in the capital in two weeks. I'm assuming that's where we are now, since it would make sense for the palace to be in the capital city. Anyway, it says security will be high for the event, given the continued uprisings around the kingdom.

Someone wrote a letter to an advice column wanting to know what to do about her son, who after working for thirty years has lost his job and returned to her home to live with her and her husband. That was three years ago, and he barely leaves his room now. The advice the columnist gave: kick the bum out and let him flit about on his own for a while. He'll either take flight on his own, or not, but his faerie pride should compel him to try his hardest.

Something similar to a comic strip appeared on the second page. It showed King Tiernan with a massive group of soldiers standing off against a small group of devil-looking men with evil faces and wicked grins. The caption says to trust in your king to protect you.

Unless your name is Cecilia. Then he just forces you into an unwanted marriage that will forever ruin the rest of your life.

“Milady?” I heard Grell say.
“Yes?” I said, looking up to meet her concerned look.
“Something I can assist you with?”
“Hm?” I said, shaking my head. “Um, no.”
“You appear distraught, if I may say so.” she said.
“I'm okay, Grell. Thank you for your concern.”

“Very well, milady.” she said, bowing her head. “Dinner will be ready soon. I thought perhaps you and Princess Cecilia would like an opportunity to wash up before eating.”
“She's not back yet.”
“Ah,” she said, nodding. “Would you like me to assist you changing out of that dress, milady?” she asked.
“I don't have anything else to wear right now. Unless you know where my clothes are.”
“Parthesoon,” Grell said loudly, still eyeing me. “Lady Renee's wardrobe has not been delivered yet. Inquire as to the reason and retrieve an appropriate outfit for her to wear to bed.”
“Yes, ma'am.” Parthesoon replied.

Grell lingered, watching me. I started to ask her if she would leave, but I really didn't want to be alone. Instead she just stood there, staring at me.

“She doesn't love me.” I whispered, finally giving in.
“Are you certain?” she asked.
“She has made it pretty clear.” I told her.
“Love has never been a requirement for a match for royalty.” she said.
“It's a requirement for me.” I mumbled, trying not to cry.
“You love her?” Grell asked.
“You can never tell her, Grell.” I implored. “Please!”
“She selected you, milady.”
“To circumvent the rules. She thought I would say no and her father would give her more time that way.”
“But you didn't.”
“He didn't ask if I wanted to be with her here for all of eternity, he asked if I love her. And I really wanted to tell him no, but I couldn't.”
“King Tiernan brings out the best in people.” she said, nodding.
“What does that mean?” I asked, sitting back and giving her my full attention. “A spell?”
“More like a force of his personality.” she explained. “It is nearly impossible to hide your intentions with King Tiernan. Even if you had lied, he would have known.”
“Cecilia managed to pull it off.” I said.
“Did she?”

I guess not. I mean the king did see right through. He knows it was all a scheme to circumvent the rules. And he's *still* making us go through with it.

“But Cecilia doesn't know how I feel.” I said.

“May I inquire why you haven't told her?”
“Because she doesn't feel the same way. It would make things even worse.”
“Perhaps her feelings will grow in time, milady.”

Could they? Is it possible that over time she could fall in love with me? That would be the most... unrealistic thing ever.

Never going to happen.

We've been best friends for a while now. If she was going to fall in love with me it would have been by now. I don't think I could say or do anything to change the way she feels.

I'm just not that lovable.

Before long Parthesoon returned. She brought a long garment bag with her, and promised that the rest of my wardrobe and Cecilia's wardrobe would be delivered later this evening.

The bag contained a night gown. It was knee length and lacy, and appeared to be designed to entice and not for comfort. However, once I got it on I could see that it actually was incredibly comfortable, and not half as revealing as I thought it would be. It was nice.

As long as nobody else sees me in it.

Luckily it came with a robe, which I secured before exiting the restroom. Cecilia was in the living room, and having already changed was waiting for me before eating.

The trays that were waiting were silver with crystals and other assorted gems, and looked as opulent and over the top as everything else here. The food was good, though. A nice salad *that I actually did like*, and some kind of tofu-ish meat-like dish with beans. It was great.

“My father would like us to meet with a diplomat from Tel-Nachta in a couple of days. We're supposed to go to a village east of here to meet him.”
“Why us?” I asked.
“He wants us to start taking on a bigger role as soon as possible. He isn't doing well at all, Ren.”
“I'm sorry.”
“I don't know if he'll be around long.” she said. She had a glossed over

look on her face, like she was barely aware of her surroundings and was instead halfway in with her father still.
“Isn't there anything they can do?”

She shook her head no. The thing is, I know how hard this is for her. I can see the calm and strong facade she is putting on, but now that we have this link I can feel the anger and fear in her, the sadness.

“Let's go to bed.” I suggested.

She nodded and we went into the bedroom. I thought it would be awkward, sharing a bed. I thought we'd get embarrassed or have to discuss it. Instead I just tucked her in and laid on my side. No words, no awkwardness.

“You don't have to be strong with me, Cecilia.” I told her.
“Thank you.” she said.

She did something on her side and the lights dimmed. I have no idea how she controls that. After a minute I could hear her sniffling. She rolled over and hugged me and cried until she went to sleep.

I laid awake for hours, wishing I had asked Grell for some of that norrow oil to help me sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Two days later, in the morning, I was asked to come see the king. It felt like being called to the principal's office for doing something wrong.

“Your Majesty,” I said, nodding a bow as I've seen everyone else do when meeting him.
“You don't bow, Renee.” he said, chuckling. “That's for servants, not family.”
“Sorry.”
“I just wanted to speak to you before the two of you left for Aschailhof.”

We were being sent to the eastern village of Aschailhof. There we will meet with the representative from Tel-Nachta, which is a kingdom of elves just east of us. I'm still not clear what we're supposed to do there, or why I am being sent, but we're going.

I mean who'd want to talk to me?

“I didn't get a chance to see you yesterday.” he said.

He had been sick in bed all day, and had been given a sedative. Cecilia had seen him, but she wanted to go alone. She had only been with him for ten minutes, but she was very upset when she came back, and she didn't want to talk about his condition.

“I managed to keep busy selecting a new wardrobe.” I explained. “The one they provided, um, didn't quite suit me.”
“Oh?”
“The dresses were mostly very formal. I kept some of them, they were very beautiful dresses, but I requested some new sundresses and some separates. Uh, shorts and skirts, things like that.”
“I see.” he said, nodding contemplatively. “You will be the first

member of the royal family to ever wear shorts, I believe."

Crap! I hadn't thought of that. Well, I saw Cecilia wear them, but that was back home.

"Will they be inappropriate, Your Majesty?"
"I'm not sure, really." he said with a shrug. "It is of no matter, Renee. You and Cecilia must forge your own path and make the kingdom new again. I have already begun receiving reports that the youth across the country are responding very well to you. I think you'll bring a freshness to our stale society."
"Thank you." I said, unsure if that was a good thing.

He had one of his coughing fits and had to bend forward and wait for it to pass. I find it hard to believe there is nothing that can be done for this poor man.

"Have you managed to ask Cecilia about the necklace yet?" he asked.
"Um," I stopped handling it and lowered my hands to my sides. "No, I haven't."
"That necklace used to belong to her mother. You might say it's a family heirloom."
"It's a very beautiful necklace." Please don't ask for it back, I don't want to give it up. I won't.
"I always thought so."
"King Tiernan, sir, can I ask why you wanted to see me?"
"Get to the point old man, huh?" he said, smiling. "Very well, I will. I really wish you'd tell Cecilia about your true feelings."
"I don't –"
"She's a stubborn girl," he said, waving a hand through the air in frustration. "If she would only open her eyes it would be obvious by now. With your spirit binding I should think you both ought to understand each other a lot better by now, but you're both so damned closed off to each other."
"We're not... er... I mean..." I sighed. "You think I'm blocking her from knowing how I feel?"
"Maybe." he said, nodding. "And it's also possible you two just haven't had a chance to get used to it yet, and once you do you'll understand what the other is feeling more easily."
"I have to admit, this whole thing scares me."
"It scared me when I went through it with Cecilia's mother, Nira. Everything I ever went through was worth it just to be with her, though." He said.

His eyes glazed over as if he were far away, dreaming of a time and place when he was with his late wife, whose name was Nira, I guess. He still loves her so much. It's obvious in every word. It's almost as if the pain of missing her has lessened and now he can at least fondly remember what he had with her when she was here.

I long for that kind of love. To be cared for so much that even when I'm gone the person's love for me will remain. The kind of love where I'll be missed, but where they can get past the pain of missing me and the love will bring such memories of joy that it was all worth it. And if the one I love goes first, I want to have those feelings for her.

Though the odds of the person I love going first are pretty slim, since she'll probably live many hundreds of years here. And I already know she will never love me as King Tiernan loves Queen Nira.

“You have a long trip ahead of you.” he said.
“Is it?”
“Yes.” He nodded and smiled. “There will be many curves in the road, and many times along the way when you feel out of place and lost, but if you stick together I think you'll enjoy the journey.”
“So how far is Aschailhof?” I asked, getting concerned now.
“Aschailhof,” he said. He laughed a funny little laugh that turned into a cough in the middle. “Yes, Aschailhof. It's about half a day by carriage, give or take.”
“Then I don't understand how it's a long –”
“I was referring to you and Cecilia, Renee.” he said.
“Oh.” Okay. I guess.
“Please take care of my daughter, Renee.” he said, reaching out to pat my forearm. “Promise me that.”
“Of course.”
“And try to find a way to tell her how you feel.” he added. “Soon.”
“I'll, um, give it some thought.” I promised.
“You do that.” He nodded and rose to his feet. “Now, this old man is going to take a warm shower to relax, then try to get the chef to make up another batch of those french fries you introduced us to.”
“Have a nice shower, Your Majesty.”
“You better get moving, Renee. You don't want to keep the princess waiting.

Grell was waiting to guide me through the palace to the stables out back. In front of the stables was one of the strangest, and most beautiful horse drawn carriages I had ever seen. It was a deep lilac color, but was made up of twisting vines at the base, that weaved all

around and together to form the entire lower half of the carriage itself. The upper half seemed to grow from it, and sort of looked like giant leaves with little windows, which were complete with tiny little awnings above each to block the sun. There was an umbrella of sorts near the front, covering the area where the driver would sit. It seemed to be growing up from the carriage like a stem with a flower at the top. And the wheels were sort of vine-like, but appeared to be perfect circles.

How do they get things to grow in the exact shape they want? Magic?

The horses! Oh *real* horses. Wow. I mean they are huge, too. Maybe like clydesdales, almost, except short haired and completely white. They all seemed to be very well trained, and seemed to almost be standing at attention as they waited for us.

“How is my father?” Cecilia asked me as I approached.
“Okay, I think. He was coughing some, but he was going to shower and have lunch.”
“What did he want to see you about?”
“I'm sure he would have invited you there if he wanted you to know.” I said, smiling. “Just kidding! Gosh, I'm not going to keep secrets from you.” Except one. “I'm not completely sure what he wanted. Maybe to see if I was doing okay?”
“He didn't say anything?” she asked.
“He told me to make sure you were okay.”
“You seemed to be worried or scared at one point in there.” she said, her eyes closed in concentration. “If I interpreted that right, anyway.” she said, opening her eyes to watch me.
“Oh. Well he was talking about this binding thing.”
“It scares me too.” she said, nodding in agreement. “But I think we just have to deal with it, Renee.”
“I know.”
“There's a very good chance that at some point I'm going to embarrass myself by reacting weirdly to something and you will pick up on that.” she said, shrugging. “I don't know how to deal with that though.”
“And now *you're* the one getting upset.” I told her. I tapped my chest. “I can feel it when you do. At least sometimes.”
“This is going to get complicated, I think.” she said.

We both laughed. What else was there to do? I don't think either of us quite has a hold on this thing yet, but when we do it will be much harder to keep feelings away from each other. This thing is like a truth

serum for your emotions. I'm just glad not everyone can tell how I feel at all times. And just as importantly, that I can't feel what everyone else is feeling at all times. That would suck big time.
The seats in the carriage were very comfortable, and Cecilia and I settled into them. But Grell and Kaena were not settling in across from us, as I had expected. Instead they took a seat outside with the driver.

“What is going on?” I asked. “Shouldn't they be riding with us?”
“That's not the way it's usually done, Renee.” Cecilia replied. “It's okay, it's a nice day.”
“Doesn't seem fair to make them ride out there.”
“I know you don't quite get this yet, but you are above them in station here. You should always, and if I have anything to say about it *will* always be treated just a little better than them.”
“That's silly.”
“It's political.” she said, not denying my reply. “People have to see us as leaders. Look, would you see the president drive the secret service around? No. Each has their own job to do. Ours is being the leaders.”
“But –”
“People won't respect us as leaders if we don't appear the way a leader should.”
“That seems dumb to me.”
“I know. I don't always like it, either. On the other hand, we do our best to make sure they enjoy working for us, and we pay them well. They get treated very well.”
“I guess.”

I don't like it, but she has a point. I mean if I saw ten people all crowded together and looking like equals then I would have no clue who the leader is. I guess it's like that.

Holy crap, I'm a leader. How'd that happen?

We began to roll. First along the path inside the outer wall, then after a pause for the gate to open, out along the road outside. As we pulled through the gate we were surrounded by at least a dozen men on horses. Guards. They were all very serious, and well armed with swords and small shields.

“This one is ill.” I said, gesturing toward one man outside my window.
“I'm sure he's fine.”
“No, look at his wings. Aura. Lifeforce. Whatever.”

Cecilia reached past me and slid down the glass, opening the window

to the outside. She leaned further over, across my lap. It was making me very nervous. She was so very close to me.

“Guard,” she shouted, waving him closer.
“Yes, Your Highness?” he responded.
“Lady Renee is concerned about your health.” she informed him.
“Oh, I'm alright, princess.” he said, sniffling. “Bit of a head cold is all. Fit as a fiddle, otherwise.”
“I think it's more than that.” I said.
“I wouldn't miss this trip for the world, Highness.” he told Cecilia.
“As soon as we get back I would like you to have a full check up with the palace healer.” she told him.
“Yes, princess. As you wish.”

Cecilia seemed content to leave it at that, but I wasn't so sure. The man looked very ill to me, but what do I know? She started to slide the window up and paused as he nudged his horse closer again.

“If I may,” he said. “I appreciate the concern for my well being, Lady Renee.” he said, bowing his head slightly.

He nudged his horse back into his spot in the formation around us and Cecilia slid the window up. When she moved back to her side of the carriage, I glanced back out the window at him and he winked and gave me a nod and smile.

Not sure what to make of that.

“This is one of my favorite parks. Aleanjoille Koya, named after my great grandfather King Aleanjoille.” Cecilia said.

I looked out the window on her side and saw a huge pond, filled with a very reddish brown looking water that was still and as smooth as glass, despite a light wind rippling the leaves in the trees. How does that work?

There were beautiful cobblestone paths, each with a curb of roots that seemed to grow in place. They were all winding about the small hills, with many flowers and bushes of varying sizes and colors. One path in the middle split around a small fountain, which was spraying water the same color as the pond up into the air, where it seemed to vaporize into a mist and come back to the ground as a hazy fog, which the daylight was catching in and creating small rainbows.

“It's beautiful.”
“My father won't let me visit it often, though.” she told me. “When I was a child I would sometimes sneak out of the palace and walk here. There's a nice place for a picnic nestled into the trees along the back side of the pond.”
“You must have been a very adventurous child.” I said, smiling. “That's quite a long walk.”
“Yeah,” she laughed. “But I always got in trouble when I'd get home and my father would ask where I had been. I've never been able to lie to him about anything.”
“Is that... a bird?” I asked.

I felt a panic rush over me. It looked like a jetliner, and it was heading straight at us. If that thing attacked we were dead.

“It's okay,” Cecilia said, giggling. “Yes, it's a bird. Sort of a larger version of a condor. Completely harmless, too.”
“That's good.” I said, trying to take a deep breath. “What if it just decided to get playful and bumped into the carriage? We would go flying.”
“They don't get too close to faeries. They're sort of scared of us. Of all magical races, actually.”
“Oh.” I said. Then it hit me. “I'm not from a magical race.”
“They still wouldn't hurt you, don't worry.”
“You seem sure of that.”
“I am.”

We rode on for a while, me completely enthralled with the flora and fauna that made up my new home. The human world was drab in comparison. I'm pretty sure there are several colors here that just can't exist in our world. Maybe the star for this world emits a different color of light, I don't know. Something has to explain it.

Then again, there's magical faeries, elves, and birds big enough to carry the whole cheerleading squad on their back, so do I really need to worry that some little thing like colors don't work quite the way I expect here?

“I think we're clear of the eyes from the city now.” Cecilia said. “Come here.”

She grabbed my hand and pulled me into the front seats, which were facing us previously. She reached up to the area on the wall above them and slid a small panel down.

“Driver,” she said. “Could you please pull over. I believe Lady Renee would like to speak to Grell and Kaena.”
“As you wish, princess.” came a reply in a gruff voice.

In fact the carriage did not pull over, it simply slowed to a stop. It was only a moment before one of the guards opened the door and poked his head inside.

“Is there a problem, Your Highness?” he asked. He looked alarmed.
“We're just stopping for a minute. No cause for worry.” she told him.
“Will the princess be stepping out?” he asked, extending a hand.
“This is all yours.” she told me. “Go to it, girl.”

I took the proffered hand and stepped down onto the dirt road outside. Everyone was looking at me. It was unsettling, and I heard Cecilia giggling at me from inside the carriage as I stepped toward the front. I guess she could feel my unease?

“Is there something we can do for you, Lady Renee?” Kaena asked.
“Yes.” I said. “Well, no. Maybe.”
“What do you need, milady?” Grell asked, bowing her head in respect.
“I just, um, wanted to offer you two a chance to... I mean if you'd like to ride inside with us, out of the dust and, er, heat...”

It was maybe seventy, so not really hot at all, and there was almost no dust at all. I always find a way to look like a complete moron in front of people.

“We would love to!” Kaena said, while at the same time Grell said “That won't be necessary, milady.”
“Please join us.” I said. “I'm sure you're enjoying watching all the men,” I said lightheartedly, gesturing toward the guards all around us. Crap, two of them are women. “Er, guards.” I corrected. “But you can do that from inside, and it's so much cleaner.”
“We appreciate the offer, milady, but –” Grell said.
“Great!” I interrupted. “Then just get on inside so we can continue on.” I told them.

I then hurried back into the carriage before Grell had a chance to argue any more. I suppose it would have been okay for them to ride out there if they really wanted to, but I got the feeling that Grell was only insisting because it was the proper way, the way it was always done. Even the king said we needed to bring new ideas and make the

kingdom our own, so here's where I start.

“You could have just ordered them.” Cecilia said.
“Could I have?” I asked. She nodded. “I kind of halfway did.” I said, just as Grell was climbing inside.

We spent the next few hours with Kaena telling me stories she had heard about Cecilia when she was growing up. It was quite entertaining to hear about the times Queen Nira would have the staff turning the palace upside down to find Cecilia when she had sneaked out to play with kids in the village or wander to the park we passed earlier. Mostly it was amusing because I could tell how embarrassed Cecilia was, I could feel it. I also thought it was funny how Grell kept trying to stop her from telling the stories, only to give in and let her.

The road switched from a dark cobblestone near the palace and past the park to a crushed rock for several miles, and then finally to a packed dirt. Nearer the palace the trees were sparse and there were patches that were hundreds of yards wide with none at all. But as we got further out they grew more dense, and some reached high above the clouds. It was so beautiful.

“It's going to be dark before long.” Grell stated. “Will the Princess and Lady Renee be heading directly to the inn upon arriving?”
“We will be meeting with the Tel-Nachtan representative first, then we will move to the inn.” Cecilia told her. “When we arrive in Aschailhof I would like you and Kaena to take some of the guards and prepare our rooms for the night.”
“Your Highness,” Grell said, bowing her head. “If I may make a suggestion?”
“Yes, Grell?”
“I suggest Kaena and the guards prepare the rooms while I stay with the princess and Lady Renee. You may need a personal assistant.”
“That won't be necessary, Grell.”
“Very well.” she said, nodding.

To be honest, I'd be much happier if there were more people I knew that were going to be there. But I guess it is important that our rooms be prepared. It seems kind of odd to me, since she never seemed to worry before about a room being all that comfortable or overly prepared. Maybe she just doesn't want Grell there for some reason.

In the distance I could see the village of Aschailhof around a smooth curve in the road. And it *was* only a village. There appeared to be

about twenty buildings at the most, with a huge stable at one end of town.

As we rode into the village I could see all the buildings were of the same type of architecture as the palace and surrounding area. Everything was very natural, all looking as if it were almost grown rather than built. And in the center of the village there was an open plaza with a huge fountain spraying lime green colored water into the air.

“So pretty.” I said.
“I've always enjoyed it too, milady.” Kaena said.
“How often do you make it here?” I asked her.
“I have a cousin here. I visit her once a month, milady.”
“Kaena's cousin owns the inn where we'll be staying.” Cecilia told me.
“Oh, well you must have her come by so we can thank her.” I said.
“No, Renee.” Cecilia said, shaking her head. “Security will never clear it.”
“Can't we order –”
“We must defer to the chief of security in matters like this.”
“Is it... dangerous here?” I asked.
“It's dangerous everywhere for the royal family.”

I suppose that makes sense, especially given that they are in the midst of an uprising. Though now I wonder why the king sent us out here. I know he wants us to take a part in the government now, and for the people to get to know us, but if it's dangerous...

The carriage rolled to a stop. The guards who were surrounding the carriage dismounted their horses and several of them tended to the horses while about half stayed to guard us.

What will these people be like? In the stories the elves are short and thin, with long ears and green skin. Will they look like that here, in reality? Will they be angry and mean, slobbering and glowering monsters?

“It's going to be fine.” Cecilia said. She grabbed onto my hand.
“Nothing to be scared of, I promise.”
“I'm not...” Oh yeah, she can feel it when I'm scared. “Well, I mean... I'm just nervous because I don't know what to expect.”
“Just be yourself, you'll be fine.”

Before I could come up with an argument against that, one of the

guards opened the carriage door. Kaena stepped out, followed by Grell. Cecilia slipped her hand from mine and took the hand of the guard as she stepped down. He immediately extended his hand back inside for me once she was down.

When I was out, standing on the bluish colored dirt road I felt a little better. What was the worst that could happen, right?

A slow, painful death, interrupted by long sessions of torture involving a wire brush and rubbing alcohol.

The guards who were tending the horses returned. With a nod in the direction of Grell, those guards followed our two servants away, toward a building across the plaza.

“Your Highnesses,” one of the guards said. “The diplomat from Tel-Nachta, one Ailyn Sasir, is awaiting your arrival.”
“Very well.” Cecilia said, motioning for him to show us the way.

There weren't steps exactly, there was sort of a ramp that looked grown from vines that led the way up to a small porch. There were guards on either side of the door, watching our every move carefully. One of them was the one who I had noticed was ill, and he gave me a smile and nod as we strode past, entering through the door.

The building was barren inside. Or nearly. Not the floral or wooden look I had expected at all. Instead it was painted a harsh gray, and was very straight and square on all sides, including the large table that sat at the center. It was cold, as if there were some kind of huge air conditioner cooling the place.

“Ailyn Sasir.” one guard said.

From the corner stepped a... man... I guess. He was shorter than I am, maybe stretching to five feet tall. His skin was an ashy green-gray color, and leathery and old looking. He had eyes that were huge, with large black pupils in the center and whites that were tinged a gray. He had a pointy, down-turned nose and small ears, which *were* actually slightly pointed, though not as drastically as the stories all make elves out to be. On his long chin hung an even longer white goatee, which reached below his waist, nearly to the floor.

“Ailyn Sasir,” the guard said. “May I present Her Highness, Princess Cecilia, and Her Highness, Lady Renee.”

“Just Ailyn.” he said, a grimace on his face as his eyes darted to me and back to Cecilia. He extended a hand toward Cecilia. “Pleasure.”
“It is an honor to meet you, Ailyn.” Cecilia said, taking his hand and bowing her head slightly. “My father speaks highly of you. Any man my father refers to as honorable must truly deserve the praise.”
“Too kind.” he said, still grimacing. His eyes darted to me again. “I prefer to speak only with the princess.” he said.
“Guards, please leave us.” Cecilia said.
“Your Highness, I do not think that wise.” The nearest guard said.
“Your father would not be pleased if we allowed –”
“My father is not here at the moment.” she said.
“Yes, Your Highness.” he said.

He glared at the elf, warning him without words. The guards all disappeared from the room, but made it well known by their noisiness that they were stationed at the perimeter of the building, as well as in the next room.

“This one.” Ailyn said, his eyes moving to me again.
“Lady Renee will take part in our meeting.” Cecilia told him.
“I will speak only to the princess.” he said.
“My father gave this duty to us both.” Cecilia told him.
“Hmph!” he snorted. “*Humans.*”
“What about humans?” I asked.
“Can't be trusted!” he shouted.

The door opened and a guard peered inside. Cecilia waved him away, but he glared at Ailyn for a moment before closing the door. If someone could murder with only their eyes, he would have been killing Ailyn with the stare. On the other hand, as far as I know people here may actually be able to kill with a glare.

“This human is a member of the royal family of Sheaubairnia.” Cecilia informed him. “She has the trust of both myself and His Majesty, the king.”
“*Not* mine.” he steamed. “How is she a member?”
“We are bound.”
“Impossible.” he muttered. “That is an affront to nature!”
“Nevertheless,” she said.
“I will not speak with her!” he shouted.

This time the guard stepped completely inside the room, his hand resting on a sword. My presence here is escalating things, causing unnecessary problems. This guy is a jerk, but he represents a whole

country. Kingdom. Something.

“It's okay, Cil,” I said, patting her arm. “I'll just go check on our rooms.”
“No.” she said. She grabbed my hand as I turned away. “Ailyn, I understand your mistrust of humans, but Lady Renee is the most trustworthy, best person I know. I trust her with my life. So should you.”
“She must leave!” he shouted.
“I'll go,” I whispered.
“No, Renee.” she said, staring at me for a second before turning her gaze upon him. “Ailyn, if you were meeting with a prince and the one he loves instead of us, would we be having this conversation?”

Is she telling him she loves me?

I guess it makes sense that she would have to tell the world that. Or at least tell *this* world that. How would it appear if the princess was bound to someone she didn't love? They don't need to know this was all a setup, and now we're stuck.

“She must go.” he repeated.
“Very well.” Cecilia told him.

She turned to the door and dragged me through it, leading me away from the building.

“Cecilia!”
“I will not stand for it!” she seethed.
“This is important, Cecilia.”
“It is important.” she said, stopping in the center of the plaza and turning to face me. “I will not let him dictate terms to me like that.”
“Oh.”
“Especially not based on his... his... his...” She closed her eyes hard, then turned toward the building Ailyn was in “His *BIGOTED* reasoning! And I won't let him insult you like that!”

Wow. I'm not sure I've ever seen her this angry. I'm almost surprised she didn't punch the guy. He was a jerk, but he was still an important diplomat from Tel... Tal... Whatever the place is. Tel-Nachta?

She dragged me to the inn, guards swirling uneasily about us with their eyes darting in every direction. They all looked very confused. Some kept eyeing Cecilia like she was going crazy.

I barely got a chance to see the inn as we zoomed through it, up the stairs, and to the end of the hallway where Grell was waiting for us.

“Princess,” she said.
“Is this our room?” she asked.
“Yes, Your High –”
“Thank you!” she snapped.

She pulled me inside, slammed the door behind her, then flopped against it. She closed her eyes and cursed under her breath.

“I'm sorry, Cecilia.” I said.
“You!” she said, her eyes opening and landing on mine. “I'm the one who is sorry, Renee. I should never have put you through that.”
“It's okay.”
“It's not okay. You, of all people, do not deserve that kind of treatment. Why that little son of a –”
“Cecilia, it's okay.”
“No, it's not.”
“Do you think your father would want you to make a big deal out of this?” I asked her, hoping to inject some sanity.
“My father would have him executed on the spot!” she spat out. “He adores you more than I do.”
“I hardly think that would be necessary.” I said. “I don't want to cause problems here.”
“You're not the problem, Renee,” she said. She squeezed the hand that I just realized she was still holding. “That asshole is.”
“Cecilia, I...” It sounds so weird to hear such a harsh word come from her sweet mouth. “Okay. Yes, he's a jerk. But we have no idea what it was he needed to talk to us about. We could at least put up with him long enough to find that much out, couldn't we?”
“Absolutely not!”
“What if it's important?”

Her shoulders slumped as she realized I could be right. He didn't ask for a meeting for no reason. There has to be something important. She finally agreed that we could try again tomorrow, if only because the elves are their closest allies, but she would let him sweat it out tonight.

“We should go to bed, I guess.” she told me a while later.
“Would you like to shower?” I asked. Her eyes moved toward my feet, then back up, then she turned red. “No, I wasn't... what I meant... It

wasn't an invitation to... I mean not we... I... I just... meant... um... before me."
"Yeah," she said, turning away. "That's what I thought you, uh, meant." She grabbed at a robe and stepped toward the bathroom. "Yes, I'll go first. Thanks."

Well that was embarrassing. I mean she doesn't even think of me that way, so she wouldn't want to... Never mind. I really have to stop thinking right now.

I hope she left some cold water. I might need it.

When Cecilia came from the bathroom she was wrapped in the robe, a towel around her hair. She wouldn't make eye contact. I guess I upset her.

"Princess Cecilia," a man's voice shouted through the door. "Your Highness," he said. He knocked on the door. Hard.
"What in the world," she said, starting toward the door.
"Your Highness," Grell's voice shouted. "There is an emergency."

Cecilia rushed over to the door and swung it open. One of the guards and Grell were outside, both looking very concerned.

"It's His Majesty," Grell said. "We must go immediately, Your Highness."
"Renee," Cecilia said, not looking back my way. "Grab my clothes."

We hurried to the carriage. It was fully dark now, but there was a full moon, leaving a blue tint to everything around us, but illuminating everything almost as well as it may be on a cloudy day.

Grell filled us in as we pulled onto the road. We closed the curtains and Grell and Kaena helped Cecilia dress as I looked away, trying not to think about a naked Cecilia right next to me. Her father was laying dying in the palace, it was not the time to get turned on.

"I'm not ready to lose him." Cecilia said, tearing up.
"Don't assume anything." I told her. "He might pull through this just fine."
"I hope so."

There were several loud clangs outside, then shouting coming from all directions. I opened the curtain just as the carriage thrust violently to

the side, off the road.

“Cover the princess!” one guard shouted.

In the light I could see at least forty men attacking our guards. Two of our guards fell from their horses as I watched. In the seconds I was watching, there was blood spraying everywhere. There were several men on foot, attacking the guards, and while I watched one of the men was chopped down by our guards.

“Get down, Renee!” Cecilia shouted, shoving me toward the floor.

The carriage accelerated, and was bumping over the terrain and no longer on the road. And then we hit something and the carriage flipped end over end.

Things came in spurts then.

I banged against the floor of the carriage, ripping my head open and blood rushing in my eyes.

I was laying on the ground, Grell and Cecilia standing over me, Kaena laying very still, eyes open, beside me. I saw Cecilia pointing and directing guards, but I couldn't hear her.

Grell pulled me into the bushes.

Cecilia fell on top of me.

--

I woke with a moan and a spike of pain from my head.

“Shhh!” Grell said. “Lady Renee, you must be silent.”
“What is going on?” I asked.
“We're still hiding.”

Hiding. We were attacked. I remember it. I remember Kaena laying dead, I think.

“Where is Cecilia?” I asked.
“She's here.” Grell said.
“Is she okay?”
“No.”

“No?!” I sat up quickly, pain shooting through my head. “Where is she?”
“Shh. Lady Renee, it would be bad for us to be found just now.”
“What happened to her?”
“An arrow.” she said. “I removed it, but there is a lot of blood. I think she has a damaged lung.”
“We have to get help!”
“Do you not think I know this, child?” she asked, angry. She sighed. “I apologize, milady.”
“Where are we?”
“A few miles from the palace.”

A few miles from the palace. So we could get there if we hurried and get back with help. Maybe, at least.

“Why didn't the guards take her to the palace?”
“They were otherwise occupied.”
“And not *one* of them could scoop her onto their horse and race her home?” I asked, getting very angry.
“They tried.” she told me. “She wouldn't leave you behind.”
“She wouldn't... what about her father? What about the kingdom? Doesn't she know how important she is to everyone?” To me?
“Do you not think I made those points?!” she snapped. “She said you were more important.”
“She... did?”
“Yes!”
“Oh.” That was stupid. “Well she was wrong. We have to get her back.”
“Lady Renee,”
“Now!”
“As you wish.” she said, bowing her head.

She stepped out from the bushes, looking back and forth. There were still men fighting in the distance. Grell hurried over to one of the horses that was still tied to a crashed carriage and she untied it, leading it back toward the bushes.

“Can you ride?” she asked.
“Um... maybe.”
“Take the reins. Start that direction,” she said, pointing. “I will get the other horse and carry the princess.”
“Grell,”
“Go!” she demanded.

I nodded and climbed up on the horse with difficulty. I started in the direction she pointed, praying we didn't come across any of the people who attacked us.

Only once on the way back did we run across any problems. There was one of the attackers that noticed us leaving and headed our direction. We went quickly, but he was getting nearer after only a few minutes. Luckily, one of the remaining guards noticed him in time to head him off. I fear that it may have cost that guard his life, though.

Dawn was breaking as we approached the palace. The guards outside had no clue what had happened, and the whole palace broke into a panic as we got near.

“What happened to your guards, milady?” one of them asked me.
“Never mind that!” I shouted. “Get Cecilia inside. Find a doctor.”
“Yes, milady.” he said.

Cecilia was rushed inside. Grell guided me to the infirmary, where the king was being kept. Cecilia was in the next room, being treated by a doctor by the time I got there.

“Doctor?”
“I am a healer, Your Highness,” he said, bowing his head. “I'm doing all I can. She has lost a lot of blood.”
“Will she... uh... make it?”
“I cannot say for certain, Lady Renee.” he told me. “I'm so sorry.”
“What are her odds?” I insisted.
“Good, I think.” he said, nodding. “Yes.”
“How good?”
“If she makes it through noon I would give her two to one odds.”
“That's not good enough!”
“Your Highness,”
“He's doing all he can, milady.” Grell told me.
“Yes, you're right.” I said, sighing. “Do your best, doctor. Um... healer.” What is the difference between a doctor and healer?
“Yes, Your Highness.” he said, bowing.

I held Cecilia's hand and prayed for her to get better. She stirred occasionally, but never came to. I couldn't even sense her feelings. She was pale, and her breathing was labored.

There were loud voices coming from the king's room for quite a while before I finally kissed Cecilia's hand and left her to find out what was

going on.

“His Majesty specifically forbade us entering the orc territory!” a soldier shouted.
“He's not fit to make that decision at the moment, is he?” the other man, who is head of the palace guard I believe, responded.
“I will not contradict an order from the king, whether he is too ill to tell me otherwise or not.”
“We can't let them get away with attacking the princess!” the head guard told him.
“Wait,” I said, stepping up. “Er, I mean... if you could please let me know what is going on? Did you say you wanted to go after the men who attacked us?”
“Yes, milady.” the head guard said.
“His Majesty specifically told me not to pursue insurgents across the border.” the soldier told me.
“But... those men attacked Cecilia.” I argued. “You have to go after them.”
“I'm sorry, Your Highness, but I cannot.”

Great. They're going to get away with this.

“General Werth,” Grell shouted, appearing at my side. “Did I just hear you refuse an order from Her Highness?”
“Madam,” he said to her, turning her direction. “I have been ordered by His Majesty –”
“His Majesty is incapacitated at the moment, as is Princess Cecilia. That would make Lady Renee head of the kingdom and your leader.”
“Well I...” he said, sputtering. “I didn't mean to... The Princess is incapacitated as well?” he asked.
“Yes.”
“I apologize, Your Highness,” he said, bowing deeply to me. “I will form a raiding party at once to go after the insurgents.”
“Thank you.” I said.

He'll go get them now. Destroy them. Kill every last one of them for hurting my Cecilia. They must be made to pay!

Only the king ordered him not to pursue them for a reason, I'm sure. If the soldiers pursue them across the border into orc territory then we'd be invading, right? Would that cause a war and cause more deaths?

“General,” I said. He halted and turned to face me. “Pursue them up to the border. If they make it across, please send a messenger to the

government of... um, the orcs, and ask them if it's okay if we go after the criminals."
"They will never agree, Your Highness."
"Tell them... um... ask them..."
"Tell them that the leader of Sheaubairnia would take it as a personal favor if they could assist us, and they will be compensated appropriately." Grell said.
"Highness?" he asked me.
"Um... yes. Do that."
"Yes, Highness."

I'm in charge? Oh boy. How in the world do I get into these things? I am dragged to a world I didn't even know existed and less than a week later I end up in charge? And people here don't exactly like or trust humans, so... this should go well.

Please get better soon, Cecilia. This is your post, not mine.

"Pardon me, Your Highness," a man in a long coat said.
"Healer Ishtuir, now is not a good time." Grell told him.
"Yes Ishtuir?" I said, ignoring the title because... well, I don't know.
"If I heard correctly, Highness," he said. "The thing is, I think you're the only one who can help the king now."
"Ridiculous!" another doctor – healer, whatever – shouted from across the room. He hurried across to us. "Do *not* bother Her Highness with such silly –"
"What silly?" I asked.
"The king can be cured." the first healer, Ishtuir said. "Or at least treated."
"Really?" I said at the same time as Grell. "Please continue."
"He's going to poison the king!" the second healer shouted.
"The elves have a treatment," Ishtuir started.
"That will kill him!"
"He's going to die if we don't do something!"
"Well he's going to die if you give him that."
"What is your name, sir?" I asked.
"Altmeire, Your Highness." he said.
"Give him what?" I asked.

There was an uncomfortable pause while Ishtuir gave a smug smile to Altmeire. Altmeire met it with a look of scorn and anger.

"There is a treatment, a type of plant extract, that the elves have been giving their people for this kind of ailment for many years, with good

results."
"This kind of ailment!" Altmeire said, indignant. "We don't even know what it is, exactly."
"Well it seems very much like what they suffer from."
"Go on." I told him.
"They won't give it to him. They are worried it will not work."
"Or kill him." Altmeire said.
"Or kill him." Ishtuir agreed.
"And this will cure him?" Grell asked.
"Well... we think he'd have to have regular treatments, but he could live many more years."

This is a lot of responsibility. *I* have to decide whether to give medication to the king, *the king of the faeries*, that may kill him, but may also be his only chance at surviving.

Last week the biggest decision I made during the day was what to wear to the pool.

"Do it." I said, talking over their arguing.
"Your Highness!" Altmeire yelled. "The king himself chose not to take this medication. He knew it was available, and he didn't –"
"I said do it." I told him, tired of arguing. "Doctor," I said to the first one, totally kicking myself for using the wrong title. "Please find me and let me know when you've given him the medication. I would like regular updates."
"Yes, Your Highness." Ishtuir said, bowing.
"I simply cannot allow this to happen."Altmeire said.
"Will it be necessary to have you removed, healer?" Grell asked him.
"You don't have the authority!"
"I do." I said. I'm in charge, right? Or was Grell just saying that to scare the general?
"Need I remind you that Lady Renee is the ranking member of the monarchy who is not incapacitated?" Grell asked him.

He sneered at me. His wingy-aura thing turned an angry, pulsing red, and he bowed deeply.

"No reminder necessary." he said. "Forgive me, Your Highness."

I returned to the room where Cecilia was and sat at her side. I grabbed onto her hand and prayed that she would get through this.

She has to get through this.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I woke when I felt Grell shaking my shoulder. She looked startled when I sat up quickly, and she apologized repeatedly for shaking me.

“It's okay.” I said, wiping at my eyes. “I guess I'm more tired than I thought.”
“If you wish, Your Highness, you could retire to your room and I can come for you if there is any change in the princess' condition.”
“Thank you, Grell. I think I'll stay.”
“As you wish.” she said, bowing her head. “Should I have lunch brought for you?”
“I'm not hungry.” I said, waving her off with my hand.
“Milady, you must keep your strength up.” She very stiffly moved to the seat next to me and hesitated as she sat in it. “Lady Renee, you are the ruler of an entire people now. It's daunting, I'm sure, but it is where you find yourself. Until His Majesty or Princess Cecilia are better, it is important that you remain as healthy as possible.”
“I can't leave her.” I said.
“I know.” She sighed. “She wouldn't leave you, either.”
“She feels guilty for bringing me here.” I explained.
“Perhaps. I took responsibility for your safety, and a guard was prepared to rush her back to the palace, but she wouldn't let go of you up until she was hit with the arrow.”
“She should have come back to her father's side.”
“The last words she uttered before she passed out were to make sure you got back safely.”

She was very worried about me. She truly is a great friend. I'm so glad I didn't tell her how I feel and screw everything up and lose her. Plus, she needs me now. I need to be here to help get things in order until she and the king are back on their feet.

I wish my mom and dad were here.

“Lady Renee,” Sina said. She stood in the doorway. “May I come in, Your Highness?”
“Yes, Sina, of course.”
“I'm sorry about Her Highness,” she said, looking down at Cecilia. “I wonder if you know of Kaena, milady?”
“Kaena didn't make it, Sina.” Grell informed her.
“Oh.” Sina said. She burst into tears. “We were going to get a home together when we were able.” she said.
“You were close?” I asked.
“We grew up together. Our mothers were like sisters. Kaena is... *was* two years older than I am, but we came to serve at the palace at the same time.”
“I'm so sorry, Sina.”
“Thank you, milady.” she said, trying to gain control over herself.
“We lost many men, as well.” Grell added.
“Why did this happen?” Sina asked her.
“It is not for you to consider.” Grell told her.

Not for her to consider? That was cold. Good grief, Grell, can't you show a little compassion? This girl just lost her friend. She's hurting.

“Sina,” I said. I let go of Cecilia's hand and slid from my seat, reaching out to pull Sina into a hug. “I'm sorry about your friend.”
“Thank you, Your Highness.”
“I will let you know if we find out what is going on, okay? I have sent our troops after them.”
“I hope they get them soon.” she said.
“So do I.”

When Sina left I returned to my seat and took Cecilia's hand again. Grell stared at me, apparently upset that I would stoop so low as to hug a servant. Ugh. The rules here just *do not* make sense to me.

“Milady,”
“Look, I'm not from here!” I snapped. “I am going to do what I think is right, darn it. That girl needed a hug.”
“Yes, milady.” she said, nodding. “I was only going to say that your remind me very much of Queen Nira.”
“Queen...” Cecilia's mom? “I do?”
“Yes.”
“Did you know her well?”
“I was her personal servant for many years.” she told me.
“What was she like?”
“Kind.”

So apparently Grell thinks I'm kind? I guess that's good. Maybe I'll go down in faerie history as Renee The Kind, benevolent (and hopefully short-term) ruler. There would be worse things to be known as.

“Headstrong.” Grell added.
“Are you saying I'm stubborn?” I asked, trying to smile.
“She would always put her feelings last and do what she thought was best for her spouse.”
“I wish I could have known her.” I said. She sounds like a wonderful woman.
“She would have liked you, if I may say so.”
“You think?”
“She would have approved of Cecilia's choice.”

If only I were really Cecilia's choice. Instead we're just stuck together because she was trying to get out of making a choice at all. But I still love her so much that it's okay, at least I get to be with her.

“That necklace you wear was the queen's.”
“That's what King Tiernan told me.”
“It is traditionally passed on from a member of the royal family to the one they love.”
“Cecilia gave it to me for luck.”
“His Majesty gave it to Queen Nira when they were courting.”
“Where did he get it?”
“His mother gave it to him to pass on. She got it from King Tiernan's father when they were courting. It has been that way for many generations, since before anyone remembers.”
“She gave it to me for luck.” I repeated.
“If milady hadn't told me differently herself, I would believe that Princess Cecilia gave it to you because she intended to court you.”
“Well no, we're just friends.”
“Forgive me for disagreeing, milady, but you two, whatever you may be, are far more than just friends.”

Well we are now, I guess. We're bound together. Spiritually. I'm still not entirely sure what all that means, but we are connected anyway. I can feel what she's feeling sometimes. I can't always interpret it yet, but I can sense things from her. Not now, she's completely out of it and not sending me anything as far as emotions, but when she's aware of the world I do.

I miss the confusion I get from all the feelings I sense her going

through. I hope she wakes soon.

“Please Cil, just wake up soon.” I whispered.

A healer came in and checked on Cecilia a while later. He waved something above her, chanted something, and rubbed his palms along her face. He implored me to get some sleep. I had lost a lot of blood from the cut on my head, and though they had bandaged it, I was still not well.

When I refused that, he ordered me to at least eat something.

I was snacking on some rather interesting fruit when Sina hurried in. She looked at me and bowed deeply, then stepped forward and extended a hand with a letter in it.

“Your Highness, this letter just came via messenger from the diplomat, Ailyn. It's addressed to Princess Cecilia. Would you like to read it, milady?”
“It can wait until she wakes.”
“Your Highness,” Grell said. She grabbed the letter. “It might be important. She would want you to read it.”
“Are you sure?”

The letter... it was from the moron we met with last night. Only he was apologizing. He said while he would always have a mistrust for humans, and didn't personally agree with inter-race marriages, he acted inappropriately and would like to apologize in person, and hopeful continue with the meeting at the princess' convenience.

Great. And here I was thinking he had a problem with us being a same-sex couple. It's not that, he's just racist. Kind of different from the racists we have back home. Cecilia and I are actually different species, but it's the same idea anyway.

Asshole.

--

I fell asleep in the chair. I have no idea how long I was out, it couldn't have been more than a couple of hours, but my back ached all over when I woke. I managed to talk the healer into some pain killer, at least. He was reluctant at first. He wasn't entirely sure what dose to give me because they don't ordinarily treat humans. He tried lighting

some incense and chanting something first, but gave in when that didn't work.

“Your Highness,” a guard said, bowing his head before me. “We've received word that our troops caught up to the rebels who attacked your carriage, milady.”
“Good.”
“Several rebels were killed in the skirmish that ensued. A portion of the rebels escaped across the border with the orcs.”
“Did you contact the orcs?” Grell asked him.
“We did.” he told her, but seemed annoyed that she was involved in the conversation at all. “Your Highness, the orc's military have captured the remaining rebels. They requested a conference with His Majesty to discuss arrangement for what to do with them.”
“The king isn't able to meet with them now.” I said. “Did you tell them that?”
“Uh,” he said, glancing at Grell again.
“Lady Renee,” she said, drawing my attention. “Your Highness, it was thought best if the public not know yet about the condition of His Majesty.”

The guard looked very uncomfortable with this. Like there would be some kind of retribution. The thing is, I understand it. They probably don't want to cause a panic. Especially since Cecilia is also unable to take over at the moment.

“Perhaps it is time.” Grell said.
“Not yet.” I told her. “We'll wait a little to see if Cecilia or the king recover first.”
“What should I tell the orcs, Your Highness?” the guard asked.
“Can I have a few minutes?” I asked him.
“Your Highness.” he said, bowing, then turning on his heels and marching from the room.

I can't just tell them the king may be dying. It would show weakness and the orcs are not exactly friendly with the faeries, from what I understand. And yet telling them to get lost, we don't want to talk to them, would be considered an insult.

“What are the orcs like, Grell?” I asked.
“Jumpy.” she said. “Scared of their shadows at times, and always full of bluster and bravado to compensate. They are easy to anger and always solve disagreements by use of force when they can.”
“Great.”

“We have a very shaky peace with them at this time, milady.”
“How do they feel about women in authority positions?” I asked, thinking of the human men I know of who act the way she describes.
“Not well.”
“I suspected.” I told her. The men I know back home with that attitude generally think women are weak. “I guess we have to set up the meeting. I'll figure out what to tell them when they are here.”
“I will take care of it, milady.” she said, bowing her head.
“And Grell,”
“Yes, milady?”
“Do you think you could come up with some kind of statement to give the public to let them know that the king and princess are ill, but that we'll keep them posted on their condition?”
“If you wish, milady.”

I don't wish. Inevitably they will want to know who is running things, and that seems to be me at the moment. Not that I actually know anything about how things run here. Mostly I guess all the same assistants and managers and things are running everything. I'm just giving an official stamp of approval when they want it.

How in the furry anteater did I end up in a position to give a stamp of approval to anything?

CHAPTER EIGHT

I woke with a start in the morning. Cecilia moved beside me. Late in the night the healer moved her aside far enough that I would be able to lay next to her, since I refused to leave her side.

“Cecilia!” I said loudly.

She didn't respond, just flopped her arm a little and let out a sniffle and then slipped back into a slight snore.

“She's been more active the past few hours.” the healer said.
“Is she going to wake up soon?” I asked.
“It's too early to say when she will awaken, Your Highness.” he said, raising a stethoscope up to her chest to listen.
“But she will wake, right?” I asked.
“I can only hope so, Your Highness.” he said. “How do you feel today?”
“Um,” I hadn't been awake long enough to think about it. “Slight headache, but okay.”
“The headache is to be expected. Would you like something for it?”
“It's okay,” I said, waving him off. “It's not that bad.”

The healer left us, and a moment later a nurse appeared. I hadn't seen her before. She used a small bottle to give Cecilia some water. She didn't ask if I wanted anything, but she did set a glass of water on the table next to the bed and nodded to me before she left.

“You have to come back to me.” I whispered to Cecilia. “I love you. I don't think I can live without you.” I told her for the first time.

I wrapped her in a hug and I cried against her. She has to come back to me. This is pure torture.

She sniffled and her head shifted. I thought I detected a flicker of

something – fear – emanate from her, and then she was silent and gone again.

“Fight Cecilia.” I said. “Come back to me.”

--

I took a few moments away from Cecilia, reluctantly, to shower and get something to eat. I feel a little empty without her in sight.

I wish my parents were here. I miss them so much.

After eating, I stepped in to check on how the king was doing. Still the same, though he did stop deteriorating. I'm taking that as a positive sign. So did at least part of the healers who were treating him. They were still gathered around him, each holding some kind of artifact, some chanting and some seeming to pray.

“Your Highness,” a guard I had never seen before greeted me in the hallway. “We have an emissary from the orcs heading this way. We expect them to get here within the hour. Would you be prepared to meet with them at that time?”
“Uh... sure, why not.” I said.
“Milady?” he said, not understanding my response.
“Yes.”
“Very well.” he said, bowing his head. “Would you care to meet them in His Majesty's outer office, or in the more formal conference room perhaps?”
“Um...” I said. I glanced over to the window. “Could I meet with them in the inner courtyard?” I asked.
“That would be unusual, Your Highness.” he said. He sighed. “The royal guard have been forbidden by Princess Cecilia from entering the courtyard.”
“Will guards be necessary?” I asked.
“Your Highness,” he said, looking down at his feet as if the answers were somehow going to be found there. “It would be... *unwise*... for Lady Renee to meet with the orcs without personal guards.”
“Well let's keep it to the minimal number of guards, okay? And if Cecilia has a problem with it later I will take full responsibility.”
“Yes, milady.” he said, snapping to attention before turning and walking away.

I'm going to screw this up. I mean this is all so unreal, anyway. I'm in a faerie kingdom, I've met with an elf, been attacked by a rebel group,

married – basically – a princess, and somehow found myself in charge of the entire kingdom. Why not meet with orcs as well?

Life is a series of odd dreams right now. Unfortunately I can't wake up.

“Lady Renee!” Grell shouted, running up to me.

Oh my gosh, she's completely out of breath. I've never seen her so excited. Kind of scary.

“The king has woken.”
“He has!” I shouted, laughing. “That's wonderful news!”
“He would like to speak to you, milady.”
“Wonderful!”

I hurried after Grell as she led the way back to King Tiernan. Healers were milling about in the hall, chattering away about the king. They parted as we closed in, allowing us to enter the room.

“He's weak.” a healer told me. “Keep it short, milady.”
“Come, Renee.” the king said, tilting his head. He looks so exhausted.
“Your Majesty,” I said, grabbing onto his arm. I realized this was probably against the rules, but I was too excited to care. “I'm so glad you're doing better.”
“They told me you and Cecilia had a close call.” he said, his voice very weak.
“We were attacked. But the people who did it have been caught.” I said. “Or, um, killed.”
“So I'm informed.” he said, nodding slightly. “You ordered this?”
“Um...” I nodded. “I didn't know what else to do.”
“Renee,”
“They almost killed Cecilia!” I argued.
“Yes.” he said. “You did what you thought was right.”
“A decision had to be made, and I didn't have anyone to tell me what to do, so I just did my best and –”
“You did fine.” he said.

I did fine? He thinks I did fine? I ordered an attack that got many people killed. I don't feel good about that. Not at all. But they deserved it. They had to be dealt with for what they did to Cecilia.

“I'm stepping down.” he told me. “I will resign from the throne. One must be healthy to rule effectively.”

“When Cecilia gets better I'm sure she'll make a great, um, Queen.” I told him.
“If Cecilia does not wake,” he said, pain in his eyes. “The next in line to the throne would be you, Renee.” he said.
“Cecilia is going to wake up soon!” I insisted.
“If she were unable to take over, whatever the reason, it would be you who would need to –”
“Your Majesty,” I cut him off. “Let's not think that way.”
“Yes, of course.” he said.

If Cecilia were unable to take over I don't think I'd want to stay here. The only way that would happen is if she were dead, and if she dies I don't think I can stay. I don't even know if I'd want to live anymore, actually.

“There's a meeting with an orcish emissary.” I told him.
“I've been told.”
“Should I reschedule that until you feel up to it?” I asked him.
“No.” He locked eyes on me. “You will take the meeting, Renee. I'm still under the care of the healers and I am unable to rule at this present time.”
“So, um, what do I tell them?”
“I leave that to you.” he said, smiling. “You have my full faith.”
“Um, er, you... I mean *I* have to decide what, um...”
“Yes.” he said, chuckling a little. It turned into a cough. “Now I'm tired. Please let me rest.”

I left, feeling more trapped than ever. Before I was only stepping in and helping because someone had to do it and the king was unable. Now he himself has put me in a position to have to.

This is so unfair.

I wonder if I can sneak back to the human world and abandon all of this zaniness.

I stopped in to check on Cecilia. She was still resting. The healers and nurses weren't around, and it made me worry that she would wake and nobody would be there.

“I will hurry back to you as soon as I can, my love.” I whispered.

I checked to make sure that nobody else was around, and when I saw that we were alone, I bent down and kissed her cheek. I felt kind of

guilty about it. She wouldn't appreciate it at all. But I had to do it. It may be the only chance I ever have.

When I went into the courtyard there were seven guards, one of which was dressed differently than the others. He didn't have the typical uniform or sword. He also was standing near the chair I sat at.

It was barely five minutes later that a group of guards guided in a group of orcs. The orcs were shorter than I am, with reddish tinted skin. They were all muscular and angry looking, dressed in some kind of fur. I could tell that the guards thought their attire distasteful. Honestly, so did I.

“Your Highness,” the guard who had been leading them in began. “The emissary from Okiet Chryad Ocht, the honorable and...” he glanced at the orcs before continuing. “Intimidating, Sir Ghekmult.”
“Ghe-ekmult!” the orc at the front said, angry. “We speak!” he demanded, glaring at me.
“Your Highness,” the guard near me, the one without the sword, said to me. “The emissary says it is a pleasure to speak with you.”
“Uh,” I said, confused. “Okay.”
“Drink!” Ghe-ekmult demanded.
“The emissary would like to have something to drink during your discussion, Your Highness.” the guard with no sword said.
“Right.” I said, still confused. “Someone get him something to drink.”
“We sit!” Ghe-ekmult shouted.
“He asks that you please have a seat, Your Highness.” old swordless said.
“Excuse me,” I said. I grabbed his arm and spun him away from the others. “What are you doing?” I asked in a whisper.
“Your Highness, I don't understand the question.”
“Why do you keep repeating what he says?”
“I'm your interpreter, Lady Renee.”
“You... oh!” I laughed. “Um, is he... he's speaking a different language?”
“Okiet, Your Highness.” he said, a confused look on his face.
“I get it.” I said. I turned to face the emissary. “Sir Ghe-ekmult, if you would please be seated, we can begin our discussion. I'm sure our drinks will be along shortly. Please excuse us,” I said, smiling and trying to laugh pleasantly. “They were under the impression I needed an interpreter.” I turned to the interpreter. “I understand everything he says.”
“You... do?” the interpreter asked.
“Yes.”

“Your Highness,” he said, sighing. “Can I ask... I mean...” he looked up at the orcs and the other guards around us. “How is that possible, Lady Renee?”
“Oh,” I shrugged. “Not sure, really.”
“Uh, yes, Your Highness.” he said, excusing himself.

How is it possible?

It's not.

None of this is.

Life is kind of a pile of impossibilities that all seem to be actually taking place right now. I'm sort of numb to the very concept of *impossible* at the moment.

“You human.” Ghe-ekmult said to me.
“Yes, emissary.” I replied.
“Human weak! Will speak with king!”
“His Majesty has asked me to –”
“Will speak with king!” he shouted at me.

The faerie guards looked uneasy. Their hands tightened around the grip on their swords. One was looking at me pointedly, as if asking if he should intervene. I shook my head no.

“I'm sorry, emissary,” I said, trying not to be too scared. This is a freakin' orc sitting across from me! For all I know he could bite my face off if I upset him. “The king himself specifically asked me to take this meeting.”
“We go!” he said, snapping to his feet.

My guards stepped closer, pulling their swords partially out from their hilts. I stood and waved my hands at them, hoping they'd step back. They didn't.

“Emissary, please sit.” I said. “I promise you, I have the full force of the throne behind me. I can address whatever your needs may be.”
“Human weak.” he said, but he sat down.
“I assure you, I speak for the empire.” I said.

Oh wait, we're not an empire, we're a kingdom. Ugh! Everyone is looking at me weirdly. Geesh, that's embarrassing.

“So anyway,” I said. “You wanted to meet regarding captured rebels? How many are we talking about?”
“We have six!” he said.
“Great! When can you return them to us?”
“No return!” he shouted. “Not until concessions!”
“What concessions?” I asked.

I can't go give them a bunch of stuff, it wouldn't be right. What could he want, anyway? Land? Free passage to the elves so they can attack them without us getting in between? Money?

“Letter from king formally thanking Okiet Chryad Ocht for help,” he said, not shouting or demanding for once.
“Oh. Um... I can... maybe make that happen.” I said, wondering if the king would sign such a document. “I can guarantee a representative of the crown will provide the letter.” Even if I have to do it myself.
“Food.” he said.
“Oh, uh, just one moment.”

I turned and beckoned one of the guards over. I told him the orcs would like to eat, to please have a servant bring something appropriate immediately. He nodded and disappeared.

“Something to eat is on the way.” I told Ghe-ektmult.
“Good.” he said, looking sideways at his assistants and guards. “What about concessions?”
“Um... was there something else?”
“You provide ten makti fruit.”
“Oh, uh, um...”

What the heck is a makti?

So he wants us to give them a bunch of fruit? As part of our payment for the prisoners? I guess we can do that. It seems reasonable.

“Not a problem.” I said.
“You agree?”
“Yes.”
“And swords!” he shouted.
“Swords?”
“Yes. For army.”

Oh boy. He just keeps adding more. What is a reasonable price to pay to get our prisoners back? I really want to see those men punished for

hurting Cecilia, but... there are limits. I mean do I arm our enemies?

“No.” I told him.
“You will give swords!” he demanded, leaning forward in his seat.
“I'm afraid I cannot do that, emissary.” I said, holding my ground.

My teeth were chattering, I was so scared. I tried not to cry, at least. He eyed me intently, leaning back in his seat.

“Fifty!” he said.
“Fifty swords?” I asked. “No.”
“No!” he shouted, leaping all the way to his feet.

I stood and held my hand against the chest of the guard who stepped up next to me, pushing him back. I stepped closer to Ghe-ekmult, scared to death but doing it anyway.

“Sit down!” I demanded.
“Hu-man.” he growled.
“Human who is a member of the royal family and has the power to order you executed on the spot.” I told him, mad now.
“And start war?” he asked.
“It is *you* who comes here and disrespects the crown.” I told him.

Unbelievably, he sat.

He glanced back and forth at the other orcs and they all shared a chuckle.

It was a very disconcerting sound.

At that opportune time I noticed a group of servants with a cart full of food standing, shaking, at the perimeter. I waved them forward. They served the food all around, and rushed away as fast as their scaredy little faerie feet would take them.

Not that I blame them.

“Ornamental sword for orc king.” he said. More of a question than a demand.
“I think that is acceptable.” I told him. Mostly letting him save face by getting one last thing.
“We deal.” he said.
“Please have your men hand the prisoners over to our soldiers.” I told

him.
“Need letter.” he said.
“I will have it prepared before your departure.” I assured him.
“Food can be delivered in parts. One part each month for year. Bring to border near Arraigemuer Sea.”
“Um...” Once a month for a year? How much is a makti?

I have a bad feeling about this.

“I have word?”
“Yes.” I said, feeling my heart drop into my stomach. “He-he, word of the throne.”
“No trust humans.” he said. “Trust throne.”

I really, really gotta find out what a makti is. Oh my gosh, please tell me I didn't just promise like ten years of fruit, or something like that.

And who ever heard of an orc eating fruit?

I really need to get back and check on Cecilia. I miss her.

“If you gentlemen...”

There was a bark of disagreement from all of the orcs other than the emissary himself. I guess they don't like being called gentle. So the stories of orcs are true, they really are a violent people.

“If you could excuse me,” I continued. “I have some things I need to take care of this evening. I'm sure the guards will be happy to show you out when you are finished with your meal.”
“Food good!” Ghe-ektmult declared.
“I'm glad.” I turned and waved the translator over. “Please make sure these, er, our guests are well taken care of. If they would like seconds –”
“They would probably like more than that.” he mumbled.
“Make sure they leave happy.”
“Yes, Your Highness.” he said.

Ya know, I could almost get used to being called that. It's kind of nice to have adults respect me for a change.

I made my way back to Cecilia and checked on her condition. She still was out. One of the healers was chanting and spreading incense around her, but he paused and let me have a moment with her.

“We're going to get the people who did this to you.” I squeezed her hand. “The last of them are being returned to us. I will make sure they are held accountable.”
“Milady?” Grell said.
“Yes, Grell?” I said, not turning to look at her.
“His Majesty is going to be given a sedative soon. He would see you first.”
“He wants to know about the meeting with the orcs, I assume?”
“A safe assumption, Your Highness.”
“Very well.”

I gave Cecilia a quick hug, then pried myself away from her. How did I get here? Why can't we just go home and forget all this craziness. Go back to our last summer before our senior year of high school, back to best friends hanging out and having fun all the time?

Now I can never go back. Even if I could go back home, I can't un-face the feelings I've faced these past few days. I never let myself think about how much she means to me, and now that I have I could never stop.

It's going to suck when she gets tired of me and finds a way out of this.

“Your Majesty,” I said, entering the room he was being treated in.
“Renee, do you think it would be possible to call me by my name?” he asked, a pained chuckle.
“Um...” Is Tiernan his first name or last? “King Tiernan,”
“You will soon be my daughter, Renee,” he said. “Our law does not distinguish whether that is by birth or marriage. It would be normal and appropriate for you to refer to me as father.”
“It just... it feels weird, still.”

I wonder what my parents would think about all of this. They would probably be very angry that I was ever in place to be attacked, maybe even that I met with the orcs. I'm still their little girl, they would want to protect me.

“Tell me about your interaction with the orc emissary.” he said. He winced as he coughed lightly.
“How are you doing?” I asked.
“The healers are working on that.” he said, waving a hand. “The orcs?”

I spent the next ten minutes regaling him with tales of my first diplomatic interaction for the kingdom. He chuckled at several points, but when I said I agree to ten makti he looked startled, but had me continue.

“You did well.” he said at the end, favoring me with a smile that looked weary and full of pain.
“I did?”
“You negotiated the return of those animals who hurt my Cecilia. We will publicly execute them so that others will not do the same.”
“Your Majesty, um, shouldn't... I mean is there going to be a trial first, or –”
“A trial!” he snapped. “Those scum do not deserve such honor.”
“King Tiernan,” I said, scared that I was overstepping my boundaries. “Perhaps... I mean maybe information would come out during the trial. Plus, it would be good to show the public how fair and just we can be, even in the face of such horrific actions.”
“Those who attack the royal family have never been allowed to live.”
“But maybe now is the time to start.”
“I don't think that now is the time to change our procedure for dealing with assassins.”
“Your Majesty, I just think –”
“Renee,” he said loudly, sighing. “This means a great deal to you?” He winced and coughed. “I leave the kingdom in your hands, as of now, until which time my health has improved, if it ever does. So this I leave to you. Deal with it as you wish, but think carefully about it.”
“Yes, Your Majesty.” I said, bowing my head even though he told me I didn't need to do that.
“Before I go back to sleep, would you do an old man a favor?”
“You are not an old man.”
“Just once, would you refer to me as I have asked?”

His smile didn't waver as he stared into my eyes. This man really seems to care. I'm not sure why. Why would my thoughts or opinion matter at all to him, other than as far as it pertains to helping run his kingdom while he is out of commission.

“Where I come from we call our father dad.” I told him. “If that would suffice, Dad, then I can call you that.”
“Dad?” he asked. “Ah yes, very informal version of father.” he said, nodding. “That is very nice, Renee. Now go, let this old man rest, daughter.”

He was smiling as I left the room, passing by several healers. They were all in good spirits, happy that the king was doing better.

I felt a warm sensation when I sat next to Cecilia. I couldn't really figure out what it was. I thought maybe it was just that I was so happy to be with her.

“She improves when you're here.” a healer told me.
“Huh?”
“She tosses around more, and seems to be in pain when you're not near.” he told me. He smiled. “She is getting much better, Your Highness.”
“Thank God!” I said, feeling tears welling. “Do you think she'll be awake soon, or –”
“It may be a while. We are trying our best to let her sleep through the healing process.”
“But she'll recover completely? And soon?”
“I do believe it won't be long.” he explained.

I was so relieved that I scooted into the bed, next to Cecilia, and just held her and smiled. I felt myself dozing in and out, and finally decided to give in and try to get some sleep.

I kept waking from dreams where I was sitting at home, watching television with my parents, and suddenly an orc would burst in and attack them. Except one time the orc burst in and started tickling my mother. Dad was very upset by this, and forced the orc to sit through an entire season of *The Brady Bunch*.

At one point I woke and found Cecilia's arm over me. I don't know whether she put it there herself or not, but it felt nice. And I kept getting that warm feeling again. It felt very comforting.

CHAPTER NINE

I woke to a loud commotion in the hallway. As I rose to check on it, Cecilia stirred. She didn't do much more than flop her hand, but it was a huge improvement.

“Cecilia!” I said loudly, grabbing onto her hand. I felt the warmth again. “I love you.” I whispered. “Please get better.”

I reluctantly pulled myself away from her and made my way out of the room. There were guards rushing around, and the healers were all being herded into one of the rooms.

“What is going on?” I asked a guard. He didn't answer me, just continued. “I demand that you tell me –”
“Your Highness,” Grell said behind me. How does she just pop up like that? “His Majesty,” she said, choking up. “A few minutes ago he ceased to...”

She couldn't continue. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. Oh no, this isn't good.

“Is he, um, gone?” I asked, fighting back tears myself.

She nodded, but didn't open her eyes or say anything. I gave her a hug, trying to comfort her. It was clear to me that he meant a lot to her.

The king was still laid out in the bed, just as I had last seen him. He looked like he was sleeping, not dead. But his aura had disappeared completely. If I didn't know better, he'd look completely human. Tall, but human.

I guess when faeries die they lose the most important difference between them and us. Their very essence.

“Your Highness,” a guard said. “It is important that the public hear about this soon.”
“Of course.” I said.
“Your Highness,” he said uncomfortably. “It is traditionally done through a public statement from the family. It is necessary to assure the public that continuity exists in the monarchy.”
“Um, Cecilia is still –”
“You have to make it.” Grell said, stepping to my side. “Milady, the kingdom is yours at this time.”
“Do you think that's a good idea?” I asked.
“I think it is how it must be.” the guard said, bowing his head.
“I don't even know what to say.” I told him.
“I'll prepare something.” Grell told me.

--

I gave Cecilia's hand one last squeeze, wishing that I was able to just stay there with her. If she were to wake up and find out about her father while I was gone she would be all alone.

The guards led me outside to the platform where I had first encountered the king. There was a podium set up there, waiting for me. A crowd of at least a thousand people stood before the platform.

One of the guards guided me up the stairs, onto the platform, and toward the podium. The crowd all looked up at me, many with blank looks or surprise on their faces. I sat the speech Grell had prepared for me on the podium and looked up at everyone.

Holy crap, they are all looking at me.

Don't screw this up, Renee.

“Good morning.” I said. Grell coughed loudly. “Rather, good afternoon.” I amended, feeling dumb already. I forced myself to stop fiddling with my necklace.

Guards crowded in around the front of the podium, watching the crowd very closely. Several guards also pushed their way through the crowd, watching people.

“For those unaware,” I said, reading from Grell's prepared remarks. “I am Lady Renee, the chosen partner of Princess Cecilia.”

There was an uncomfortable rustling in part of the crowd, and I was pretty sure there were some rude remarks about humans said by some. I swallowed hard and glanced about, wishing I had some water.

“I come to you this morning to make an official announcement from the crown. As many of you may know, for some time His Majesty, King Tiernan has not been well. This morning...”

I choked up and had to stop for a moment. The look in people's eyes told me they already knew what I was going to say, but had to hear it still.

Why is this so hard?

“This morning...”

I looked down at the papers Grell had prepared for me. There were three pages. I was less than halfway down the first. She's not usually this wordy. There is no way I'm making it through all this.

“It is my responsibility to inform you that the king has passed away.” I said, skipping over part of the notes.

The crowd broke into a loud grumble. Sobs began. Several women shouted out in pain, and several men shouted that it couldn't be.

“I am so sorry to tell you all this.” I said, leaving the script momentarily. Grell cleared her throat again. “Right.” I shuffled the papers to the next page and glanced at it. It was long winded. I need to condense it. “Recently, Cecilia... er, Princess Cecilia and I were on a, um, diplomatic mission to... to... Well I can't remember the town's name, but we were heading back after we heard the king was ill. Anyway, Cecilia was injured along the way, and she is unable to take over at this time.”

More gasps and groans among the crown. I looked back at Grell and she motioned for me to hurry up.

“As such,” I said. “I have assumed the duties of the throne until the point she is able to take over.”
“You're human.” a man in front said loudly.
“Yes, sir, I am. But I will do my best to honor and respect your rules and traditions while I keep things together.”

“You don't even know our traditions!” someone else shouted.
“You have my word that I will do my best, and it will hopefully only be a few days.”
“Where is the princess?” someone else shouted.
“She is currently getting medical attention. The doctors... the healers assure me she will fully recover soon.”
“You have no claim to the throne!” a voice called out.
“Lady Renee's claim to the throne is indisputable.” Grell called out in reply. “She is bound to Princess Cecilia, as witnessed by many of you present.”
“Um... I... I hope to hand this over to Cecilia soon.” I told them. I tried to think of how the president would end a speech. “That's all for now. May God bless us all, and God bless the kingdom of Sheaubairnia.”

I hurried from the platform, back inside the palace. Those people were not wrong. I don't belong in charge of anything, let alone an entire kingdom. Especially a *faerie* kingdom. Yet here I am.

“Your Highness!” A guard shouted as I walked in. “The princess is awake!”
“Thank God!” I said.

I'm so ecstatic!

Oh! Oh! I can feel her, too. She's scared and nervous. I think. And alone. I have to go see her!

“You came back to me!” I said, thrusting my arms around her as I stumbled to her bedside.
“My father –”
“I'm so sorry, Cecilia.”

I held her and we both cried for what seemed like an eternity. I wanted so much to tell her how much I love her, but I knew it was not a good time. There was no reason to make things awkward at this time.

“The princess needs rest.” a healer told me.
“And you have another announcement to make.” Grell told me.
“Don't go.” Cecilia said.
“It's okay. I'll be right back. I just have to go inform people that you are awake. The public is concerned about you.”
“I don't want to be alone.” she said, sniffling. “Hurry back.” she said, nodding.

This time I scurried to the podium on the platform quickly, happily. I gave a quick announcement that Cecilia was awake and would be taking over. People seemed pleased by that. A couple of them muttered something about her being better than any human.

When I got back, Cecilia was asleep. I hurried to her side, panic flooding me. Then I felt an intense sadness coming from her, and I knew she was okay, just asleep.

“How is she, doctor?” I asked.
“She's doing fine.” he said, giving me a strange look. Oh yeah, they don't call themselves doctors here.
“Is there anything I can do to help her recover quicker?”
“She just needs a few days of rest, Your Highness.” he said. He lit some kind of incense that smelled like cinnamon. “She's on her way to a complete recovery now, no doubts.”

I laid beside Cecilia and curled around her, happily awaiting her recovery.

CHAPTER TEN

Cecilia sat on the throne, looking like she was completely out of place, but at the same time looking beautiful with her regal dress, robe, crown and make up. She has healed quickly, and seems well. At least physically.

Sadness. Overwhelming sadness. That's what I get from her. I have my own to deal with, I really liked the king, but what I'm picking up from her is almost harder to deal with. We were supposed to feel just a sense, a piece, of what each other feels. If what I am getting from her is only a part of how sad she really is then I don't know how she's even breathing right now.

Cecilia decided to forgo a public coronation ceremony, opting instead to have a small private ceremony and put out a public announcement that she would officially become Her Majesty, Sovereign Queen Cecilia of Sheaubairnia tomorrow.

Cecilia was seated in a throne at the edge of the royal cemetery. I took my seat at her left in a smaller, slightly lower throne. There were more than enough guards to defend us if any insurgents were to attack.

Or if, say Russia, were to attack.

There are a crazy amount of guards here.

I reached up and took Cecilia's hand as King Tiernan's casket was paraded past, then placed before the crowd for the ceremony. Cecilia held up pretty well, only allowing a few tears to spill. Grell, who was across the aisle from us in seats set aside for palace servants, wasn't so controlled.

Half the kingdom must have been there. And every province head had

to make their way past us, offering Cecilia their condolences. The Priestesses who presided over the funeral each had wonderful things to say about the king and his commitment and love for the people.

When they lowered him into the ground, the priestesses surrounded the grave and lowered flowers onto the casket. And then they began to chant. Above the grave a faint green light began to glow. It grew stronger and stronger, like a heavy mist, turning to a fog. Then, before my very eyes, roots and vines, grass, weeds, bushes and even a small tree and some flowers began to grow, filling in the grave. In less than ten minutes the grave was invisible, other than the trees and flowers, each a brilliant orange. A group of craftsmen brought forth a large monument with birds and flowers carved from stone, with a base with an etching of the name of the king emblazened in a glowing green.

It was a somber evening. Cecilia wanted to spend the evening alone, going through her father's belongings. I could feel a wide range of emotions coming from her, everything from sadness to joy. As the evening went on there was less sadness and more... kind of a nostalgic happiness, I guess. That's how I interpreted it, anyway.

She was very quiet when she came to bed late in the evening.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Your Majesty,” one of the guards greeted Cecilia at breakfast. “How are you this morning?”
“As well as can be expected.” she replied.
“Queen Cecilia, the prisoners the orcs turned over to us have arrived this morning. Shall I schedule the public execution for today?”
“As your schedule allows.” she said, waving her hand.
“Cecilia!” I shouted at her. “No!”

The guards all glared at me. What? I can't yell at her now that she's the Queen?

“Your father promised me they would get a fair trial when I negotiated for their return.” Sort of, anyway.
“*You* negotiated?” she asked. “With the orcs?”
“Um... yeah.”
“You understood them?” she asked.
“Um... yeah.”
“Huh.” she said. “And what did you say to make them bring the prisoners to us?”
“I, uh, promised a letter thanking them, ten mikta of fruit, and an ornamental sword to give to their king.”
“*TEN MIKTA!”* she said. “Whew.”
“What is a –”
“You promised half the fruit we grow in a year, Ren.” she said. She shook her head. “It's okay, we'll just... try to get people to grow more fruit. Better to have drunk, happy orcs than sober angry ones.”
“Drunk?”
“Yeah,” she said, giggling in a very un-queenly way. “They make mead with it.”

She ate some gel-like thing that looked slightly like egg whites, as she seemed to think things over. Finally she nodded and turned to a guard.

“Cancel the execution.” she told him. “The prisoners will be given a public trial. Assemble the chief judge from each province as soon as possible. We will have the trial here in the palace grounds.”
“Yes, Your Majesty.” he said, bowing deeply.
“Renee, you do understand that if they are found guilty I'm going to insist they be executed, right?” she asked.
“They attacked a member of the royal family.” I said. It makes sense they'd be executed. I'm not sure I like it, but it makes sense that if you're ever going to execute someone that it would be for something like that.
“Two members.” she said. “I will never forgive myself for bringing you here and putting you at risk.”

Sadness washed over her. I felt it flowing strongly. She reached over and grabbed onto my hand. I felt tingly, and I knew she could tell as she looked up into my face.

“Thank you for everything.” she told me.
“Yeah,” I said, completely incongruously.
“Do you want to stay for the trial?” she asked.
“What do you mean?”
“I mean,” she sighed and looked at the guards. “Please leave us alone.” she told the guards and servants. “Renee,” she said when they were gone. “I'm going to send you back to your parents.”
“What?!”
“I've made up my mind. You don't belong here.”
“But... but...”

She can't do this to me!

“You said it would cause an overthrow, that your family would lose power, that it could cost lives and –”
“I'll deal with it.” she said.
“Don't you have to be married to hold the throne?”
“Usually.” she agreed. “Right now the people are on my side because I just lost my father.”
“And so you're just going to take advantage of his death?” I asked.
“No,” she said, letting go of my hand. Oops. “Not like that. I just mean it gives me a chance to correct a major mistake.”
“A major mistake.” I repeated. “Yeah.” I said. “I have to be here for the trial.” I told her. “Excuse me.”

I got up and hurried away, to our room. And then into the bathroom,

so I could lock the door and keep her out in case she came to check on me. I don't want her to see me like this, even if she can feel it.

I just wish I had my privacy. It's so embarrassing to be in love with someone who doesn't love you back, but who can tell your every thought and feeling. Someone who thinks being with you is a major mistake.

--

I fell asleep.

In the bathroom.

Yeah, really.

“Lady Renee,” Grell said, sounding annoyed as she knocked. “Will you *please* open the door, Your Highness.”
“Just a sec.” I mumbled.

How long have I been in here? How long has she been knocking?

Why is there a pillow crease in my face when I fell asleep sitting up on the toilet?

“What's up?” I asked, swinging the door open.
“Her Majesty sent me to check on you. She was worried.”
“Oh?”
“We're all worried.” she added.
“About what?”
“Your Highness, you've been in here for three hours.”
“Oh. I... I fell asleep.”

Great, now I'm worrying the staff. Oh well, I won't be worrying them for long. At least I'll get to see Mom and Dad soon. I've missed them so much.

But I'll never get to see Cecilia again.

“What does that look mean?” Grell asked. She doesn't usually notice my looks.
“Grell,” I moved past her to the bed and sat. “Have you ever been in love?”
“Your Highness?”

“Oh, I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry into your personal –”
“Yes, I've been in love.”
“How... I mean is he... it was a he, right?” I said. And now I'm embarrassed. “How did it go?”
“We had Ryson.” she said, smiling. “Ryson was a wonderful child.” Her smile faded. “And then he changed. My husband died battling the orcs.”
“Oh.”

And I just made a deal with the orcs. Great. Everyone here must love me. Clearly my lack of understanding of their history is a hindrance here. It's probably better for everyone that I go back to home.

Well, better for everyone other than me.

“Ryson turned against everyone and everything important to his father and me when that happened, and especially against King Tiernan.”
“I'm sorry, Grell.”
“I'm ashamed of who he has become.”

How could anyone raised by this amazing woman turn out so badly? I get that he was hurt by his father dying, but how could he end up like that?

“I still think of my husband often.” she said.
“How do you do it, though? Live without the person you love so much?”
“I put all of my energy into serving Queen Nira, then Princess Cecilia, and now you, Lady Renee.”
“So... so... so how do *I* do it?”
“Your Highness?”
“She's sending me back.” I said. I actually laughed. “Returning me like a pair of jeans that don't fit when you get them home. Rejecting me.”
“After the spirit binding?” she asked.
“Yes.”
“Lady Renee, there are some things that cannot be taken away once given.”
“Such as?”

She paused, and during that pause Cecilia walked in, scowling at me. Grell bowed and left the room.

“What is wrong with you?” she asked.
“Did you know Grell's husband died fighting the orcs?” I asked in

return.
“Of course. A lot of people died fighting the orcs.”
“And *I* negotiated with them, gave them... well, all that I gave them, probably insulting poor Grell and everyone else whose relatives died fighting them. I had no idea.”
“It's fine, Renee.” she said. She sat next to me. “We are at peace with the orcs now. You did a good thing getting those people back peaceably.”
“I did?”
“Yes. And I just heard that everything will be in place to begin the trial the day after tomorrow, so we'll be able to get that finished up quickly and ship you off.” she said, smiling.
“Yeah.” I said.

I tried to smile, I really did. I don't know if it came out very well, but I tried. For her. I know she has to be able to tell how much I care about her by now, she must feel it with all this silly binding thingy, but I need to give her that little bit of assurance that she is doing the right thing, that it's all going to be okay. I don't want her to ever think back on this and worry that I wasn't happy to leave.

“I'll be happy to see my parents again.” I told her.
“You'll say hi for me, right? And apologize?” She laughed.
“Of course. Though I'm sure they were happy to get rid of me for a little while.”

Everyone else important to me is happy to get rid of me, anyway. I really hope once she sends me away she manages to find someone who makes her happy. The really sick part of that is, when she does I'll probably feel it.

Now that's a disturbing thought.

“Want fries for lunch?” she asked.
“You know I can't turn down a good french fry.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The day of the trial has come. It has been an uncomfortable wait. As much as I dread being forced to go back with my parents when it's all over, I'm anxious to see those men hang for hurting my Cecilia.

I spent all day yesterday wandering the grounds, trying my best to take in all the beauty and wonder of this world, to lock it all in my memories so that I would always be able to come back here in my imagination.

Cecilia was busy most of the day yesterday with administrative tasks involved with being Queen. Meeting with all the various advisers and such, learning what her father had put into place and discussing how to move forward, things like that.

And now the trial. And once the trial is over she's going to send me away, so I'm guessing all the chances to spend time alone with Cecilia have passed. Which really sucks, I have to say.

Out in the very same yard where I first met the king, in the very same place I declared to the world that I love Cecilia, the very place where I announced the death of the king, they assembled an entire courtroom.

There was a stand for the panel of judges, a cage for the defendants, and a table for the prosecution. At one side, surrounded by more guards than I thought necessary considering the defendants were caged and shackled, stood the thrones for Cecilia and I, as well as seating for our servants. There was seating for a large crowd to watch, and many more people crowded in around them. There was an entire army of guards and soldiers patrolling the grounds, all heavily armed and ready for action.

“We now convene this trial of the six defendants.” The head judge

announced. “Head Prosecutor, state the charges.”
“I am Head Prosecutor Kensathoir Heann. Your Honors,” the prosecutor said, standing. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, to the crowd. “Your Majesty and Your Highness,” he said to Cecilia and I. “These men are here today being charged with terrorism, sedition, treason, fourteen counts of murder, plotting to overthrow the crown, and assault with intent to kill a member of the royal family of Sheaubairnia. We ask that these vile monsters be found guilty and be put to death. Thank you.”
“Thank you Mister Heann. Does anyone speak for the defense?”

The defendants, the horrible men who attacked and hurt my Cecilia, all looked at each other for a moment. Then one of them stood.

“I will.” he said.
“Your name.”
“I am Ryson Dierbhise.” he said. “And I protest these proceedings on the grounds that I do not recognize your authority to sit in judgment of my colleagues and I.”
“We have full authority given to us by the crown and –”
“An illegal and unjust monarchy, which does not respect the will of the people and which fails in its duty to protect and defend the citizens of the great nation of Sheaubairnia.”
“Are you through?” the judge asked.
“For now.”
“How do the defendants plead?”
“Does it matter?” he snapped.
“Ryson!” Grell called out. She glanced sideways at me, bowing her head in apology.
“I see you still support the traitors, mother.” he shouted out. “An all new traitor, apparently.”
“If you have any shred of integrity left within you then you will apologize for your actions, denounce your ways, and beg that they make it quick.”
“One day you will see that we are freedom fighters, mother.”
“That's enough.” the judge said.

Amazingly, Ryson shut up. I feel so bad for Grell. She is a strong woman, but she looks very upset. Understandably.

I reached over and squeezed her shoulder. She looked sideways at me and gave me a nod of thanks, but her face never lost that hardness she was working so hard to maintain.

“I'm sorry, Grell.” I whispered.

Unlike trials I'm used to seeing on television, the prosecution and defense didn't have opening statements. Instead, the prosecutor immediately called a witness, one of the guards.

“It is true, isn't it, that you were one of the men who were attacked that night as you headed back to the palace?” Mister Heann asked him.
“Yes, I was sir.”
“And were the defendants among those men who attacked?”
“Yes.”
“Thank you.”
“Mister Dierbhise?” the judge asked.
“Your Honor, how can I properly question a witness from the confines of a cage?”
“Would you expect us to just let you roam free?” Mister Heann asked, laughing derisively.
“I ask only that I be allowed to freely defend myself against these preposterous charges.”

The judges conferred with each other for several minutes. Something I've never seen before then happened. The head judge got up from the table and approached us. He waved one of the guards over as he stepped in front of Cecilia and bowed.

“Your Majesty,” he said. He seemed very uncomfortable with this. “The defendant has a point, we think. Would there be any objections to letting Mister Dierbhise out during his examination? Provided the guards could guarantee safety at all times, of course.”
“We could shackle his hands and feet, Your Majesty.” the guard said.

Cecilia stared at the judge for a long time. At some point she turned her attention to the cage with the defendants inside. I can feel the anger rolling off of her.

“Your Majesty?” the judge said.
“Lady Renee,” she said, turning to me. “What do you think?”
“I think to show that we are going out of our way to be completely fair we should allow it.” I said.
“Do it.” Cecilia said.

And that is how five minutes later Ryson Dierbhise stood not twenty feet from us, questioning the guard. He went on and on with his

questions. How do they know it was him and his friends? How do they know they weren't under the instructions of the king? How can we know the guards themselves weren't responsible for the attack, and Ryson and his friends weren't the ones saving the royal family?

He finally finished over an hour later, after Mister Heann asked the judge several times to make him limit his questions to things that were relevant. But the judge was giving him maximum leeway, he said. As a matter of fairness.

Unlike in most trials back home, here the prosecution and the defense take turns calling witnesses, so Ryson called the next witness, one of the co-conspirators. By the time he was done I almost believed that they were fighting for the good of the kingdom.

Of course the prosecutor turned that around and made it clear they were just out to destroy the monarchy. Or take it all over.

The prosecutor called four more witnesses, the defense called three, and then the defense asked for a lunch break.

After the break was when they dropped the bombshell.

“I would like to call Renee Harris to the stand.”
“Your Honor!” Mister Heann shouted, leaping to his feet.

The crowd yelled and shouted, and some even threw purses, shoes and clumps of dirt, whatever they could find, at him. The judge banged his hand on the table loudly, getting everyone's attention and settling them.

“If I am unable to call my witness it will be clear that this trial is an unfair show, not really out for justice.”
“Your Majesty?” the judge asked, turning to Cecilia.
“No!” she said. “I will not allow her to be put through that.”
“Clearly, *your honor*,” Ryson said. “this trial cannot be fair, and I must ask that all charges be dismissed until such time the prosecution can provide us access to proper witnesses to defend ourselves.”
“I'll do it.” I said loudly.
“Renee!” Cecilia said sharply.
“I-it's just a few questions, it'll be okay.” I told her.

Five guards surrounded me as I rose from my seat and approached the witness stand. I took my seat and was sworn in, just like I would have

been back home, other than I made a sacred oath to the people and kingdom to tell the truth.

“Renee,” Ryson said.
“You *do not* refer to Lady Renee that way.” Grell shouted.
“It's fine, Grell.” I said.
“The defendant will treat her Highness with respect.” the judge ordered.
“*Lady* Renee,” Ryson said.
“Ryson,” I addressed him, trying to keep from shaking, trying to appear tough and as though I wasn't scared.
“You are human?” he asked.

The crowd murmured slightly. I don't really think this was a surprised to anyone. I mean it's not like they couldn't tell, right?

People really seem to be hung up on that here.

“Yes.” I said.
“And you are here because you agreed to come along with *Princess* Cecilia, correct?”
“That is correct.” I said. “But you will please refer to her as Her Majesty or as Queen Cecilia.” I said. “She is your queen now.”
“She's not my queen.” he said, waving his hand and stepping closer. The guards put their hands up and he stopped. “But let's move on. Is it true that you were on the carriage when the supposed attacks occurred?”
“I was.”
“And did you happen to see me attack anyone that night?”
“I witnessed the attacks, yes.”
“But did you see me? Or any of the defendants here today?”
“It was dark, I couldn't say.”
“I see. So you *can't* identify the attackers.”
“Our troops followed you directly to orc territory, Ryson. There's no doubt in my mind it was you.”
“And was King Tiernan the one to give that order?” he asked.
“I believe it is public knowledge that the king was incapacitated at that time. That is the reason we were hurrying back.”
“And you knew the king was ill when you set up the meeting with the elf?” he asked.
“Yes, we did. But we didn't know –”
“And is it true that you understood every word the elf said?” he asked, cutting me off.
“Well... yes, I suppose –”

“And you clearly understand all of us?”
“Clearly!” I snapped. “And If you don't stop interrupting when I answer I'm going to stop talking to you, Ryson.”

People in the crowd laughed, and I felt some kind of weird emotion coming from Cecilia. I turned and she was smiling. I must have said that at some time before?

“Who was giving orders when the king was out of it? Cecilia?”
“That would be Queen Cecilia to you.” I reminded him. “I don't think you're doing yourself any favors by ignoring that. And no, she was injured during the attack.”
“So did the military pursue the attackers and stop at the border, then negotiate for a trade with the orcs all on their own? Without orders?”
“No. I gave that order.”
“Under what authority would *you* give such an order?”
“Well, er, um... I believe at the time I was kind of the top ranked member of the monarchy who was capable of –”
“So you're saying you negotiated with the orcs all on your own?”
“Well yes, but by then the king was awake and gave me the task to –”
“Oh, so he conveniently woke up in time to legitimize your actions?”
“Ryson!” Grell snapped.
“Your Highness?” he said.
“He woke, yes.”
“So during this negotiation, is it true you had to give a lot to the orcs to get them to hand us over?”
“Yes, I suppose so.”
“I see. And then the king conveniently died. And was this after you ordered he get medication that many healers told you would kill him?”

Uh-oh. Cecilia didn't know that. The people here didn't know that. Oh my gosh, Cecilia, I am so sorry. Oh gosh, she's so angry. I can feel her anger. And hatred. And even if I couldn't, I can see it on her face.

“Your Highness?” he said.
“It wasn't like that.” I said, sounding defensive even to myself. “One of the doctors... healers... he said it would help. And it seemed to at first.”
“And then he died.”
“Well... but it... the healers said he'd die if –”
“So at that point you were once again in charge, right?” he asked.
“Well –”
“You made a public announcement to that effect, did you not?”

“I did. But Cecilia woke up right after that.”
“That would be Her Majesty, Queen Cecilia?” he asked, throwing my own reminder back at me.
“Yes.”
“And did that upset you?”

Upset me? What? What in the world is he talking about? Of course it didn't upset me!

“It must have ruined your plans.” he continued.
“What plans?”
“Let me lay out some facts, as you've testified, and see if I have it right. Would you promise to answer honestly if I do?”
“I have already sworn –”
“Cecilia is sent by her father to the human world to find her prince,”
“That is –”
“*Queen* Cecilia! My apologies.” he said, nodding her way. “And then while she was there at some point you found out she was a faerie, a princess of our wonderful kingdom. Correct so far?”
“Well... yes.”
“The next thing that happens is you're brought here, bound to then Princess Cecilia in an expedited fashion. Right?”

Where is he going with this?

And why does it suddenly feel like I'm giving a confession?

“Your Highness?” he prodded.
“Yes.”
“Oh, and you find yourself able to communicate in our language, for some reason?”
“Yes.”
“Out of nowhere, you and the princess, while the king is on the verge of death, go away on a mission, where the princess is conveniently injured, almost mortally so. When you get back, *you* order our capture, then negotiate to provide the orcs half the food grown in the kingdom for a year, plus a letter apologizing to the orcs for war crimes, and then give the order that ends with the king's death, resulting in you inheriting the crown. Is that right?”

That sounds so awful. When you put it that way it seems like I was part of some massive plot.

“Lady Renee?”

“No, it isn't. The letter was *not* an apology for any –”
“But the rest was true. If anyone here were in a position, had the motive, *and opportunity* to overthrow and to seize the monarchy, I suggest it was Lady Renee.” he said, turning to the judges, then spinning to the crowd. “In fact, I would suggest she set up the whole thing, the attack on the carriage and all, as part of her plans to bump off competition for the crown. The fact that she understood the orcs is quite convenient. How do we know she wasn't working with them all along to undermine the monarch so they could take over? For all we know she seduced the princess to convince her to bring her here in the first place.”
“That's not –”
“I'm finished with the witness!” he shouted over me.

O.M.G.

I'm being framed with trying to seize power.

This isn't possible.

“Your Highness,” Mister Heann said to me.
“Chief Prosecutor,” Cecilia's voice rang out. Everyone turned to her. “I will question the witness.”
“Your Majesty,” he said, dipping his head.
“Uh, Your Majesty,” the judge said. “This is highly irregular.”

She ignored him and stepped toward me. When the guards surrounded her she literally shoved them out of her way. She's so very angry.

“Did you kill my father?” she asked.
“I can't believe you would even ask me that.”
“*Did* you?”
“No.”
“What happened?”
“He was dying.” I said. “Everyone agreed on that. One of the healers thought there was a chance that something the elves had shown him would work, but the others thought it wouldn't. I figured any chance was better than none and told them to go ahead. And it seemed to be working.”
“Why didn't you tell me all this before?”
“I don't know! Cecilia, you have to believe me!”

She turned her back and walked a few steps, then turned toward me again. I could see in her eyes that she did believe that much, at least.

“Are you a part of any plot to seize control of the monarchy?” she asked in a softer tone.
“No.”
“And at what point did you decide to seduce me?” she asked, a smile curling her lips.
“I wasn't aware that I had.” I told her.
“Is it true that you took part in the binding ceremony at my request, to help me trick my father into giving me more time before having to choose?”

The crowd did not like that question in the least. She just admitted to dishonesty, to lying to the public and the king.

“Yes.” I answered softly. “But the king didn't ask me what you said he would, and I couldn't lie to him when he asked what he asked.”
“If you cared about me?” she asked.
“He asked if I loved you.”
“And of course as my best friend, you do?”
“Yes.” I said. She smiled.
“When you promised the orcs ten makti of fruit did you even know what a makti was?”
“No. I am so sorry.”
“It's quite alright, Lady Renee.” she said.

She looked down at my hands, which were fiddling with my necklace. I realized I've probably been doing it all along. I stopped, but Cecilia turned and looked at Grell, who waved her over and whispered something to Cecilia. Cecilia smiled as she turned back toward me.

“You understand Sheaubairnian? And you understood the elf we spoke with, and the orc?” she asked.
“Um, yes?”
“Would you do me a favor, Renee? Would you remove your necklace?”
“Wh-what?”
“You never take it off, do you?” she asked.
“No. It's the most important thing in the world to me.” I said, feeling a bit hurt that she'd even ask me to take it off. “You gave me this when I was in the hospital.”
“Can I borrow it for a just one minute? I promise I will give it right back.”
“Um...”

I nodded. My hands were shaking too much to unclasp it. It was almost a physical pain. Not only was I being accused of all of this, and not only was Cecilia sending me away, now she was taking away my necklace that she gave me.

She stepped close to me and reached out to unclasp the necklace. She pulled it off of me and stepped back.

She said something... her mouth was moving and there was sound coming out, but there was no way I was ever going to make out what it was. She smiled and turned to look at the crowd behind her, then laughed and looked at me again.

“Could you please say something, Renee?” she asked, in English this time. She giggled.
“What do you want me to say?”
“That will do.”

She held the necklace up and said something to the judges and the crowd, then held it out to me. When I reached for it, my hands shaking, she leaned forward instead and clasped it around my neck. I grabbed onto it with both hands and felt tears roll down my cheeks for the first time today.

“Your servant, Grell, pointed out that this particular necklace is enchanted. Were you aware of that?”
“I think so. It's supposed to make me closer to you, to understand you better, right?” I said. I let out a laugh. “I'm not sure it works. Anyway, I thought you just gave it to me for luck.”
“That is what I told you, isn't it?” she said. “Grell suggested, and I think we just proved, that the necklace has a *slightly* different effect on you, instead giving you the ability to understand and speak all these languages.”
“You're kidding?”
“That is what I believe, anyway. So does that sound like a more plausible explanation than you being in a conspiracy with the orcs? And wasn't that letter just a thank you letter for working with us in capturing the defendants?”
“Yes. On both counts.”
“So to wrap this up,” she said. “Do you have any wish to take control of the kingdom? Would you like me to just step down and give you the throne, 'cause I will if you want it. I'd do anything for you, Renee.”

In that moment I felt like she would. Like maybe she loved me. I know, I know, it's just a feeling, and with all the stress... but I let myself wallow in that feeling for a moment before answering.

“I would *not* like that, Cecilia. You are my queen, and that's the way it should be.”
“Thank you.” she said. She looked up at the judges. “No more questions.” she said.
“I have a few more ques –” Ryson began.
“*No more questions!*” Cecilia said, freezing him with a stare.
“The witness may step down.” the head judge said.

My legs were shaking as I made my way back to my seat at Cecilia's left. Grell smiled up at me as I sat, and I leaned over and gave her a one armed hug.

After a few more witnesses, each side gave a closing argument. Ryson once again tried to paint me as the mastermind for an overthrow. Cecilia grabbed onto my hand and pulled it up onto her lap, smiling over at me. That took most of the sting out of it for me. And the fact that the crowd was grumbling at him as he gave his closing helped too. The public didn't believe his accusations against me.

All six defendants were sentenced to death. They will hang, publicly, three days from now.

And I won't be here because Cecilia is sending me away.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“As we have previously made public during the trial of the traitors, Lady Renee did not come here with true intent to join me.” Cecilia said over the podium.

She's been up there talking for twenty minutes, recounting what will happen to the convicted prisoners and letting them know the plans to tighten security and better protect the people going forward. Now she was on to the part where she was going to tell everyone she was sending me away.

I can feel how upset she is. I guess I would be too, if I feared people were going to take my father's kingdom from me because I had disgraced the crown.

“My actions were self-centered, devious, cowardly and against everything my parents raised me to believe. On top of that, they insult the honor of our kingdom and the people. For that I am very sorry, and I can only ask for your forgiveness and promise I will do better. If the public requests that I relinquish the crown, I will do so freely, but at that time I would want the next monarch to be elected, and would begin immediately putting in motion everything that would be necessary for that to take place at the earliest possible time.”

The crowd was jeering at this very thought. People shouted support to her, and it filled me with hope and faith in the people – both my own hope and Cecilia's, which I could feel oozing from her.

“To correct this error in judgment,” she continued, shooting a glance at me. “And to correct the damage I have caused Renee and her family to the fullest extent possible, I will be sending Lady Renee back to the human world, back to her parents.”

The crowd went dead silent. Some were smiling, obviously not happy

that I was here in the first place, but many actually looked upset by this. Some person finally said something about the binding being irrevocable.

“We are bound.” she explained. “Nothing can ever remove that.” She turned to me. “I am so very sorry, Renee. I would if I could, but it is not possible at this time. I will always continue to look for a way, I swear to you.”

I don't know how this is going to work. I guess I'll always feel her emotions, even from back home? That is going to suck, especially when she finds the person she loves.

“Lady Renee will no longer be considered a member of the royal family, will no longer be bound by our laws and rules, and will have no responsibility to the kingdom of Sheaubairnia or our people. She will, effectively, no longer be *Lady* Renee.”

This is more painful than I thought. My heart has been shredded.

“She will, however, remain an important part of our history and will always be considered a friend to the people and someone who went above and beyond to protect the people and the royal family. She was loved by my father, and no negativity towards her will be tolerated now or at any point in the future.” She paused to take a sip from the blue drink that was sitting on the podium. “That concludes my remarks. Blessings upon the people of Sheaubairnia.”

People murmured as Cecilia and I stepped down off the platform and made our way, followed by Grell, Sina and a cadre of guards, into the palace.

“One last lunch before you go?” Cecilia asked, smiling.
“Yes.” I mumbled.

I don't think I could eat if held at gunpoint.

We were led into the dining hall by Grell, where Cecilia took her place, and I sat across from her. Grell lingered at my side instead of leaving us to have a private meal.

“Lady Renee,” she said. She reached out and put her hand on my shoulder. “If you should need me, I will be right outside the door. If you need anything at all, milady.”

“Thank you Grell.” I told her, touched by her kindness.

She moved into the hallway outside, leaving me and Cecilia to sit there and stare at each other. For my part, I was so overwhelmed with my own sorry that I couldn't feel Cecilia's relief coming from her, but it was obvious on her face. I tried my best to reflect that to her, just to make things easier. Even though I know she can feel how upset this is making me.

“So,” she said, finally breaking the silence. “Think anyone back home would believe any of this if you told them?”
“No.” I said, unable to laugh along with her. “This place is so beautiful. So wonderful. The people are just...”

I had to stop, I didn't want to choke up in front of her. Not now. Instead I made myself cough and I reached for the water.

“Excuse me.” I said.

It just occurred to me how much I'm going to miss the people, not just Cecilia. I'll miss Grell and Sina, and the guards who I recognize but whose names I don't yet know, and I will definitely miss the beautiful way the people here live, their culture, and the way they treat each other.

“I'm sorry I brought you here, Renee.” she said. She smiled. “At least you got to meet a few of the races who inspired your bedtime stories.”
“Very loosely based.” I said, nodding.

We fell silent again. It's not like us to not be able to chat. This is so awkward. Maybe it would have been better if I had just left already.

“We had some good times.” she said, just as the servants brought in the food.
“We did?” I asked, actually managing a laugh. “You mean the five minutes between being attacked, worried about my dying best friend and her father, or the part where I was accused of trying to seize power?”
“Yes,” she laughed. “That five minutes was amazing.”

We ate... well, *she* ate and I picked at my food. About the only thing either of us said was how great the food was. It was made in my honor.

French fries.

There really wasn't a lot for me to gather to take with me before leaving. Cecilia and I went to our room... her room, and we looked around. She offered to let me take something as a memento, but I didn't really want the reminder, so I declined.

And that was that. We moved to the front entry hall, where all the staff had convened to wish me goodbye. Many were smiling, all bowed one last time, and Sina – who was giggling, of course – cried and moved to hug me before stopping herself. I leaned forward and hugged her anyway.

“Guess this is it.” I said to Cecilia. I bowed deeply. “It's been nice to know you, Your Majesty.”
“You don't bow.” she said, echoing what the king had told me.
“I'm just a commoner now.” I said.
“You've never been just a commoner, Renee.” she said.

She put on a smile, but I knew she was going to miss me as well. It would be easier this way, though. She would be able to move on and find her perfect match. As painful as it is, I know that.

“So do I just walk out there and... how do I find the way back?”
“I'll have the guards guide you.”
“Do you really think I need guards at this point?” I asked.
“Definitely.” she said, smiling.
“Well then... umm...” I reached up and fiddled with the clasp on my necklace, trying to undo it.
“What are you doing?” she asked.
“Grell, could you please help?” I asked.
“Yes, Milady.” she said, stepping up.

She reached up and undid the clasp, letting the necklace fall into my hands. I felt lonely and like a part of me was missing before it had even come completely off.

It hurt.

A lot.

“Here you go.” I said, holding the necklace out toward Cecilia. “Thank you for letting me use it for a while.”

Her smile faded. For once she actually looked as if there was some kind of regret about something. But then her smile returned and she took it from me, extending it to Grell and muttering something in a language I no longer understood.

Cecilia grabbed onto my shoulders and held me firmly at arms length. And then the necklace was lowered over me and Grell fastened the clasp.

“The necklace is yours, Renee. I want you to keep it.”
“Cecilia... Your Majesty –”
“Stop!” she said.
“This belongs to your family. It is handed down from one generation to the next, passed to the person they love, and always stays within the royal family.”
“And now it goes home with you.” she said. “I won't take no for an answer.”
“But won't you want to give it to –”
“You're taking it!” she said, smiling. “That is an order from the Queen of Sheaubairnia. Do you dare defy me?”
“No,” I reached up and felt it with my fingers. “I don't dare defy you, Your Majesty.” Tears blurred my vision. “I'm going to miss you, Cil.” I said, thrusting my arms around her.
“I'll miss you too.” she said. “You will always be in my thoughts, Ren.”
“I love you.” I whispered.
“No matter where you go or what you do, or whatever comes my way here, you will always be my best friend.”
“Yeah,” I said, pulling back and trying not to think how much I wish I could be more. “I better get going, I guess.”

I walked away, the guards leading. I will never see her again.

I turned for one last look, waving. She didn't see me though, she was turned and talking to Grell.

We walked through the gate and out onto the same path I had come in on with Cecilia however many days ago. I think I even recognize that tree.

“Your Highness,” Grell said.

I jumped as she appeared next to me. I clutched at my chest, my heart thudding.

“How do you do that!”
“I asked Her Majesty for permission to accompany you home to make certain you are safe.”
“Thank you Grell, but you don't have to do that.”
“I still serve Lady Renee,” she said, bowing her head. “I would like to continue doing so as long as possible.”
“Thank you, Grell. I really appreciate it. You've been a wonderful friend to me.”
“As have you to me.” she said, bowing her head again.

It was only a few moments before we reached the location. Grell stepped forward and gave some incantation and the sky began to shimmer.

“Thank you all so much for keeping me safe.” I said to the guards.
“It has been a pleasure to serve you, Your Highness.” one of them said. He looked familiar.
“Ah!” I said, recognizing him. “You seem to be doing well.”
“Yes, Your Highness.”
“I'm glad you survived the attack. Was it just a head cold?”
“Well... no, Your Highness.” he said, shrugging. “You were correct. I had a virus, as well as high blood pressure and a parasite.”
“You are doing remarkably well.”
“Our healers are fantastic.” he said, smiling. “I have to take an herb twice a day for the blood pressure, but otherwise I'm doing good.”
“I'm glad. You take care of yourself.” I told him. Then I gazed at the others. “All of you, please take care of yourselves. And take care of Cecilia for me, huh?”
“We'll do our best, Your Highness.” a different guard told me.

When I looked at the portal, Grell was standing right next to it. It was obvious she meant she was seeing me through to the other side. I thought she just wanted to get me here and see me off.

“Milady?” she said, extending her hand.

I gripped her hand and we walked through. I felt a momentary tingling I don't remember from before, then we were there in Cecilia's backyard... or the backyard of the house Cecilia used to live in, anyway.

“Welcome home, Your Highness.” Grell said.
“Yeah. Thanks.”

I looked around. Everything was so drab. It was like watching an old movie where all the colors had faded and looked washed out. There were so many vivid colors and so much contrast in Sheaubairnia compared to here.

“It is quite warm here.” Grell said. “And there is so much brown.” she said, looking at the grass.
“Well, it's summer. We haven't been getting much rain, or hadn't when I left, so all the plants are dying. Usually the grass is green, like the bushes.”
“I see.” she said. She looked around. “You will need to lead the way, milady.” she said. “I have never been here before.”
“Oh, um, aren't you heading straight back?”
“I shall come with you to your home.”
“Oh. Okay.”

I walked out of Cecilia's back yard, onto the sidewalk by the street. I'm glad it's only a short walk. I mean people are going to think it's weird to see an older woman dressed the way she is following a younger girl down the sidewalk.

I wonder why I don't see her wings here?

I didn't have my key with me when we got to our house. I knocked and rang the doorbell, but there didn't seem to be anyone home.

“What day is it?” I asked Grell.
“I am uncertain, milady.” she said. “In Sheaubairnia your seven day calendar is not normally followed.”
“Ah,” I said, nodding. It makes perfect sense. “I imagine they are both at work now.”

Great. It's like maybe one in the afternoon, so it'll be three hours before anyone is home. It's going to be a long wait.

“Well, I'm sorry you didn't get to meet my parents, Grell.” I said, extending a hand toward her to shake.
“Milady,” she said, glancing down at my hand. “You will wait for your parents?” she asked.
“Yes. They won't be too long, so I'll just sit here and wait.”
“Here?” she asked, looking around. “Would milady mind if I sit?”
“Um... okay.” I said. “Aren't you expected back?”
“I will stay.”

Great, she's going to sit here and wait with me. Cecilia probably told her to make sure I got home safely, so now she is just going to sit here until she can make the handoff to my parents.

“Would Lady Renee like me to find something soft for you to sit on?” she asked.
“No, it's okay. And Grell, you don't need to call me that anymore.”
“Milady, there are many things that cannot be taken away once given.”

What the heck does that mean? Cecilia *did* take away that title. She sent me away. Rejected me. Sent me to my room. Doesn't want to play with me anymore. Say it however you want, she didn't want me.

“Like true friendship?” I asked.
“For one.” She nodded and looked around the neighborhood. “I do not understand this place.” she said. Her gaze returned to me. “I was thinking of another status that cannot be taken away.”
“Like what?”
“I'm quite certain Her Majesty would not appreciate it if I said anything further, milady.”
“Like... like maybe... are you saying... she can't take away my... title?” I asked. “Is that why you keep calling me Lady Renee?”
“That is correct.” she said. She sucked in a breath to continue.
“Wait, so you're saying I will always be Lady Renee? What does that mean?”
“It means many things, milady. Your Highness, Her Majesty's feelings _”
“I can feel her missing her father, even from here. Do you think that will ever go away?”
“It is common for the binding to only get stronger.” she said.

Oh great. How will I ever live with this, then?

--

“Renee?” Mom shouted.

She slammed the car door and sprinted over to us, throwing her arms around me in a hug. I could see Grell contemplating stepping in front of me to protect me, but I think she realized it was my mother.

Good thing, Mom would have bowled her over.

“How... why... where?” she burbled.
“I'm home.” I told her, squeezing her.
“Where's Cecilia?”
“Her Majesty remained at the palace.” Grell explained.
“Oh,” Mom said, pulling back. “And please introduce your friend.”
“Mom, this is Grell. Grell, this is Mom. Er... Caroline Harris.”
“Pleased,” Grell said. She looked at me as if she were waiting for a title to call my mother. “Mother of milady.” Grell concluded awkwardly.
“Heh, that would probably be Mrs. Harris.” I explained.
“What's with this *'milady'* thing?” Mom asked, smiling.
“That is the proper way to refer to Lady Renee, Mrs. Harris.” Grell said, bowing her head.
“Yeah, even though Cecilia kicked me out, I guess I get to keep the title.”
“Kicked you out?!” Mom asked.
“Long story.”
“Did you fight?”
“No, I just... I'll explain later. I'm tired, I'm going to go take a nap.”
“I could explain, milady.” Grell offered.
“Oh, that's very nice of you Grell, but you should probably be getting back.”
“I would stay.” Grell said.
“That won't be necessary, I can explain when I've slept a little.”
“Milady,” Grell said. She bowed her head. “I serve Lady Renee. *Only* Lady Renee.”

She serves only me? What is that supposed to mean? Holy crap, surely Cecilia didn't send her here for good?

“Cecilia isn't expecting you back, is she?” I asked Grell.
“Her Majesty gave me leave to continue to serve Lady Renee.” she answered.
“Oh.” Well that's... odd. “Grell, people here don't usually have, um, personal servants. Especially just normal girls.”
“Your Highness is not a normal girl.” Grell said.
“So I should set an extra place for dinner?” Mom asked.
“Uh,” I looked from Grell to Mom. “Yeah, whatever. I'm taking a nap. Grell, if you'd like to fill Mom in on the doings in faerie land, go for it. We can discuss the length of your stay after dinner.”
“Yes, milady.”

I stumbled up the stairs, suddenly overcome with complete

exhaustion. I don't even feel like contemplating why Grell is still here right now.

Me sleepy before me thinky.

--

I woke to the smell of pizza cooking in the oven downstairs.

And the sensation that Cecilia was incredibly sad.

I want so much to pull her into a hug and make it okay. I wish there was something I could do. Even though she kicked me out, I don't care, I would still comfort her. And then I would leave again, if she wanted. I just wish she'd let me back in.

“Mrs. Harris asked me to let you know dinner will be ready soon, milady.” Grell said.
“Smells good.” I slid from the bed and straightened my hair a bit in the mirror. This place feels so small. “Do you like pizza, Grell?”
“I am uncertain.”
“You've never had pizza!?” I asked, shocked. “Oh we will have to see what we can do about that, then.” I stepped toward the door. “You, my lady, are in for a treat.”
“Lady Renee,” she said, bowing her head. “It is not proper for you to refer to me as 'my lady'.”
“We don't usually use titles here. Could you just call me Renee? Please?”
“I don't know if I can do that, milady.”
“Work on it, okay?”
“Yes, mi... Renee.” she said. And I think she blushed.

We hurried down the stairs and into the kitchen. Dad was there, and I hugged him and told him how much I missed him and love them both.

I started to give him and Mom a quick rundown of what had happened the past couple of weeks, but Mom told me Grell had already filled them in.

“I'm sorry about the king.” Mom said. “It sounds like you two got along well.”
“Yeah, um... anyway...”
“Sit.” Mom said. “Eat while you talk.”

“Grell has never had pizza.”
“They don't have pizza in whatever-the-place-is-called?” Dad asked.
“Not that I'm aware, Mr. Harris.” Grell responded.

Mom laid before each of us a plate filled with a thick, gooey, cheese pizza. I sprinkled red pepper and parmesan on mine, and looked over to Grell. She was studying the slice of pizza as if it may be a particularly difficult puzzle.

“You'll like it, I promise.” I told her. “And I'm sure there's nothing in there you'd find offensive.”
“How does one eat such a thing?” she asked me.
“Some pick it up, like this,” I said, demonstrating. “Some use a knife and fork and cut pieces off. But I say give picking it up a shot, as long as it isn't too hot.”
“As you say, milady.”

I held my pizza up, still demonstrating for her. She hesitated, then picked up the piece before her. Mom and Dad were just watching, smiling. I took a bite to demonstrate, then Grell followed suit.

“Ugh! Hot!” I said, reaching for my water. “I think I burnt my mouth.”
“Does Lady Renee require medical attention?” Grell asked, still chewing.
“No.”
“Sorry,” Grell said, swallowing. “This is very pleasant.”
“Try adding parmesan.” I offered the shaker to her. “Or some red pepper.” I said.
“Grell was telling us she will be staying.” Dad told me.
“Yeah, about that,” I said. “Grell, it isn't necessary for you to stay here.”
“I serve Lady Renee.” she said.
“But... I mean there isn't room here, and... it's not that I don't want you here, you've been a really good friend to me, but...”
“Lady Renee has been a very good friend to me, as well.” she said, smiling.
“But I can't... I can't even, like, *afford* to keep you.” I explained, feeling dumb. “I can't pay you, and you deserve –”
“Her Majesty Queen Cecilia has taken care of that, Your Highness.” she said.
“She... what?”
“Apparently,” Dad said. “There is a bank account.”

A bank account. Cecilia is paying Grell to come take care of me? I

mean I guess I'm flattered that she cares enough to take care of me, at least.

“Her Majesty explained to me that there is quite a large sum of the money that is used here in an account. That is why I was delayed when you departed, milady. Her Majesty sent someone to retrieve her credentials.”

She reached into a pocket and pulled something from it. A small wallet. I took it, thinking there could not be enough money in there to last long. Instead I found an ATM card.

“I was to inform you that you should use the account as you see fit.” Grell explained. “I would suggest that milady could compensate her parents for the inconvenience of our presence.”
“You aren't an inconvenience.” Mom told us.

I'm not sure how this is going to work. How can I return to school if I have a servant following me around, for instance.

“You should really go back. You belong there, Grell.” I told her.
“I serve you, Lady Renee.” she said.
“Grell,”
“Please,” she said. “It is better for me not to be there now, Your Highness.” She looked down at her lap and her body slumped a little. “Please do not ask me go back to watch my son die, Lady Renee.”

Ouch. I hadn't thought of that. A criminal, a traitor, and maybe even a killer, but he's still her son. As much as she knows he has to be dealt with, it can't be easy to know what that means for him. There was a child that she raised, and a good child I have to believe, and to her he will always be that child, even if he's done terrible things now.

I can't make her watch that. Not alone, especially. And Cecilia wouldn't understand. Or couldn't. I don't see Grell as the kind who would open up about her feelings to anyone unless she had to. So she'd just sit there at Cecilia's side and suffer through her son being executed.

“If you stay, you have to fit in.” I told her. “Mom, do you think you could lend her something to wear until we can get some more, uh, *human* clothing?”
“I believe I have something.” Mom said, smiling.
“And you have to stop calling me Lady Renee or Your Highness.” I

said.
“I will try, Your Highness.” Grell said.
“Yeah, this just isn't going to work, is it? Could you at least just call me Renee when we're in public?”
“I will try my best, La...” She grimaced and gave a little nod, almost as if it was to herself. “Renee.”

So great. I have a personal servant. I mean why? Like, seriously, why would she want to stay here?

And where is she going to sleep?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It has been a tough couple of days. Yesterday I couldn't manage to get out of the house. I had Mom take Grell shopping for clothes. Grell wasn't happy, but I kind of ordered her.

I'm so unhappy here.

I know it's stupid to think that way, this has been my home all my life, but it's different now. I know so much more now. I know about magical creatures and landscapes that have a weird sort of beauty that can never be matched here. I've witnessed the culture of a different people, and even been in charge for a short time.

But mostly I miss Cecilia.

I can't stop thinking about her. It doesn't help that she is constantly sending wave after wave of jumbled emotions my way. I can tell she is angry, scared, lonely, and misses her father, all at the same time.

And then to top that all off, I see her every time I close my eyes and I want nothing more than to hug her or hold her or just be with her.

I'm completely, totally, undeniably miserable.

And I'm so incredibly embarrassed, because I know Cecilia is sitting there feeling a sensation of every emotion and feeling I have, all because of this stupid binding that we went through.

“Feeling okay, kiddo?” Dad asked.
“Oh!” I sat up quickly, almost falling off the sofa. “I didn't hear you come in.”
“I don't know how you missed it, I knocked the vase off the stand.”

I turned quickly to look. There were no glass shards spread on the

floor, and the vase was actually sitting where it always had.

“Huh?” I asked, confused.
“I got lucky, it didn't break. But it sure made an awful sound, and, uh, there's a possibility I could have said something unkind toward it. Rather loudly.”

Unkind. As in he swore? He almost never swears. When he does, it's usually when he stubs his toes.

“Scoot over, young lady.” he said, nudging my leg. I scooted down and he sat. “You've had a tough couple of days.” he said.
“I guess so.” I nodded, not seeing any point in lying.
“Talk.”

My dad has a way of getting me to talk when I don't particularly want to. He usually is much more tactful about it than this. This time it just seems like he's tired of seeing me mope around.

“You can't understand.” I told him.
“It was exciting there? You were treated like a princess?” he asked.
“No. Not a princess. At least not the way you see on television.” I shrugged. “I was treated like an adult, sort of, and definitely with respect, but... I guess there were servants and everything,”
“Like your friend Grell?”
“People there are so interesting.” I said.
“Interesting enough to abandon your life here?” he asked.
“I... no.” I mumbled, shrugging.

He patted my leg and gave me a very knowing smile. His patient waiting while he watched me was very unsettling. It was like he wanted me to go on, but I couldn't.

“You miss her.” he finally said.
“Yeah,” I said, actually laughing because it was so obvious.
“Why did you come back here, Renee?” he asked. “Not that I'm complaining about getting my little girl back.”
“Well, um, when the king died –”
“No,” he said, raising his hand. “Why did you come home?”
“Um...” I began, not wanting to go into details. But his look caught me off guard. He was so worried about me. “She didn't want me.” I said, burying my face against his chest like I did when I was little. “Cecilia sent me away, and she doesn't want me at all. It was all just to trick her father, and I was never who she wanted.”

“It's okay.” he said, rubbing my back. “It's going to be okay, Renee. I'm sorry.”

I've spent a lot of the past couple of days crying, but I try not to do it in front of others. It doesn't seem... um, I don't know, maybe regal? But now I was crying like I hadn't cried since my puppy was hit by a car when I was seven. Crying oddly felt pretty good.

“This just isn't home anymore, is it?” he asked softly.
“I'm sorry, Dad.”
“It's as it should be. I always hoped for the day you'd fall in love with someone who deserved you, someone who would treat you the way you deserve to be treated. I was worried it was too early for that, but I thought Cecilia was it.”
“Me too.” I whispered. Though I'm pretty sure that's a lie, because I always knew I was just a friend in her eyes.
“I used to expect you to bring a young man home, maybe five years from now, and introduce him as your fiance.”
“I haven't ever hidden the fact that I'm gay, Dad.”
“Well, I know that true enough. But this vision went back to before I knew. Fathers imagine their little girls growing up too, it's not just something mothers do. And I always imagined intimidating him, scaring him so much that he'd worry he might wet himself when he came to meet us, and then, eventually, grudgingly grow to like him and see how good he was to you. I never expected to be informed you were married by a messenger faerie.”
“We weren't married, just spiritually bound.”

It's amazing that he had these dreams for me. I wonder how far back they do go. Did he have these dreams for me before I was born?

“I'm sorry you can't go back, Renee.” he said, patting my back again. “Maybe one day she'll realize what she is missing.”

--

Mom and Grell brought pizza home for dinner. Apparently Grell really likes the stuff. I mean I love pizza, don't get me wrong, but Grell seems a little crazy about it.

I was through with my second slice of pizza, sipping on my Pepsi and reaching for another slice, when it hit me.

Fear.

Stronger fear than I think I've ever felt before in my life. But it wasn't mine, it was Cecilia's.

And there was anger. So much anger.

“Milady?” Grell asked.

I glanced up at her and saw the look of concern. Her eyes were down on my plate, where I had dropped the slice of pizza. I glanced back to Grell. My breathing was catching, coming in quick gasps.

“Renee?” Mom said. “Are you okay?”
“Huh?” I looked up at her. “Oh, um, yeah.”

They would never understand. If I told them I have to go back to be with her, to protect her if necessary, they would forbid me from doing so. They would think it's too dangerous.

They'd be right, too. But I have to go. She's in trouble.

“Would you like some more parmesan?” I asked Grell, trying my best to sound normal.
“Thank you, milady.” she replied.

Grell noticed something was off, though. She was staring at me. She wasn't saying anything, but I could see that she was concerned.

“Sorry, I'm just a little jumpy.” I told everyone, forcing a laugh.

They all dropped it, thankfully, but Mom kept an eye on me for the next twenty minutes.

After dinner Mom and Dad went out back to sit on the patio and have some coffee. They invited me and Grell, but I said no. I rarely sit with them anyway, so that didn't raise any suspicion, but I did make it clear to Grell with a look that my no was for both of us, so she declined as well.

“Cecilia is in trouble!” I told Grell. I guided her up the stairs, toward my bedroom.
“What do you wish to do?” Grell asked.
“We have to go back.”
“I will inform your parents while you gather your things, if you like,

milady."
"No! You can't tell them! They'd try to stop me."
"What will you do, Renee?" she asked.
"I just... I'm leaving a note explaining, and... I guess we better get out of here before they come back inside."
"As you wish." she said, bowing her head.

I left a note telling them Cecilia was in trouble and that I had to go. That I would make it back when I could, and to always remember how much I love them. I also left them the ATM card for the account Cecilia set up and told them to use it however they saw fit.

When I was done with that, Grell and I walked out the front door. I wish I could have said goodbye to them, because something told me I may never see them again, but I knew they'd keep me from going. Cecilia was in danger, I couldn't risk that.

Grell and I ran the six blocks to Cecilia's house. I was afraid they'd find the note and try to catch up with us before we got through the portal to the other realm.

"Do you think maybe I could have brought Mom and Dad along?" I asked Grell. We were standing before the shimmering portal that she had just opened with her incantation.
"No." she said flatly. "You are tolerated because you are a member of the royal family of Sheaubairnia. They would get no such benefit."
"But maybe if –"
"They would not be safe, Lady Renee." she insisted.
"Right."

That sucks. If I had managed to stay there it would have been my mission to make people there trust humans. At least enough to let Mom and Dad visit. Surely they could trust my parents? I mean they have to be the most trustworthy people ever!

"Lady Renee," Grell said, prompting me. "We are losing the light. Even in Sheaubairnia."
"I love you guys." I said, thinking of my parents and facing in the general direction of our house.

Grell and I stepped into the shimmering portal. Our next step was into the beautiful world I missed so much. It was shadowy, near sundown, and the rays of light were turning the blue bark on the trees and their multicolored leaves all a fluorescent tone.

“This place is beautiful during sundown.” I said.

We moved quickly, and I could still feel the anger and fear from Cecilia. In fact, it was growing stronger still. It was distracting enough that it was hard to step around stones and limbs in the path because my mind wasn't on walking.

Grell pulled me into the trees near the palace. There was a fire somewhere inside, lighting the sky an orange tone and sending a terrible smell – that reminded me of burnt lasagna for some reason – into the air.

Maybe that is what Cecilia is so scared about. Fire.

That would be wonderfully mundane, and I hoped that was all it was. And I hoped that everyone inside was safe from the fire.

“Something more than fire.” Grell said, as if reading my mind. “We must be cautious. The guards.”

I looked toward the gate, to the place the guards would usually be. If there were none there it would make sense; they could be fighting the fire. But instead there stood several men who were not in the uniform of the royal guards. They were each dressed raggedly, differently, and held weapons that were not those issued by the crown.

A muffled sound came from beside me, and when I turned to look Grell's way, a hand gripped around my mouth and around my waist, holding me tight.

Holy crap! I bet Cecilia can feel *my* fear now.

“Mmlmlmph!” Grell exclaimed. I'm pretty sure it was a swear.
“Let them go, you fool!” a male voice said. “Madam Grell, Lady Renee,” a man, one of the guards, said, bowing deeply. “Deepest apologies, Your Highness.”
“What is the meaning...” Grell was shouting, but the guard held his finger up in a shushing sign.
“We would all do well to avoid calling the attention of those traitors, Madam Grell.”
“What is going on here?!” I demanded.
“Lady Renee,” the other guard, who had been holding me, said. “I am so sorry for, uh, touching you, Your Highness.”

“It's fine. Tell me what is going on? Where is Cecilia?”

The guards shared a look. An 'uh-oh, you tell her' look. This can't be good. Oh my God, please don't let Cecilia be hurt.

“Her Majesty was taken.” the guard who had grabbed me said.
“Taken how?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

The world swam before my eyes. Dear God, is this what it is like just before you faint?

They can't have my Cecilia.

“We have to get her!”
“Milady, we should retreat to a safer location.” Grell suggested.
“Yes.” one guard said.

They guided us away from the palace, to an area where several soldiers and guards were gathered, as well as several of the palace staff who I recognized. Maybe twenty people in all, crowded around a small glowing orb.

“Are you working on a plan to get her back?” I asked a man in a soldier's uniform who looked to be in charge.
“No, we're sitting on our rears and playing Jekadi.” he said angrily.
“Ceagado!” Grell shouted at him. “You will be respectful to the royal family!”
“I'm not a member of the royal family.” I said. “Not anymore.”
“Of course.” the man, Ceagado, said. “My apologies, Your Highness.” He bowed deeply. “I am not myself at the moment. Please forgive me.”
“Grell,” I said, ready to tell her to stop spreading lies to the people who will be going after Cecilia.
“Your Highness?” she asked.

In my head I could hear her saying *there are many things that cannot be taken away once given.*

Is this one of those things?

“Please tell me what you have planned so far.” I said to Ceagado.
“Not much, Your Highness.” he admitted.
“Tell us everything that happened.”
“Were not sure.” he said.

“It was spiritfolk.” a guard said.
“Excuse me?” I said.
“Renee,” Grell said. “The spiritfolk are a race of people who live in the Moraise Daishe forest near the far northwestern part of the kingdom. Our people have very little contact with them.”
“At least the ones who survive to tell of the experience.” Ceagado added. “Did you just refer to Her Highness without the proper title?” he asked, smirking.
“Absolutely not!” she replied.
“Yes you did!” he shot back.
“No, I under no circumstances would ever refer to Renee without –”
“You just did it again!” he said, raising a finger to point.
“I –”
“What the fluffy pig snout does it matter!” I shouted, stepping between them. “Are honorifics more important that getting Cecilia back?”
“No, Your Highness.” they both said in unison.
“I apologize, Lady Renee.” Grell said.

Cecilia is being held by these... spiritfolk, whoever they are, and these ninnies are arguing over what to call me.

Unbelievable!

“These spirit people are what, like ghosts?” I asked.
“No, milady,” Grell said, smiling.
“Yes, actually.” Ceagado said.
“They are not *ghosts*!” Grell told him.
“She didn't ask if they were, she asked if they were like them.”
“What Her Highness meant –”
“I was responding to what she *said*, not what she *meant*!” he shouted at her, trying hard to stare her down.
“You are an idiot.” she said simply, staring right back.
“Shut up!” I shouted. “You're like children.” I turned to the guard who first mentioned spiritfolk. “Children, am I right?”
“Yes, Your Highness.” he said, bowing his head and smiling.
“Am I going to have to figure this all out by myself?” I asked, angry at them for wasting time when Cecilia is in danger.
“No, Your Highness.” Ceagado said.
“My apologies.” Grell said.

They both still glared at each other. What kind of silliness.

“Just as the prisoners were to be executed, the spiritfolk came, with

the insurgent group, and overwhelmed our troops and guards." Ceagado said.
"How many were there?" I asked, trying to get a scale of things.
"Well, er, maybe thirty or so insurgents." he said.
"And spiritfolk?" Grell asked.
"I believe there were five." he said sheepishly.
"Only five?" Grell asked. "Against all our men, all our guards and staff?"
"It's impossible to fight those things!" he shouted, getting in her face.
"Nothing is impossible." she replied dryly.
"Well fighting the spiritfolk is as close as it gets!"
"Maybe if you were more prepared –"
"Maybe you should have been there to chase them off yourself!"
"Maybe I should have been!" she shouted.
"If you'd like to have a go at it, I can take you to them!"
"Puh! If you know where they are why aren't you attacking?"
"Because unlike you I have sense enough not to attack an enemy I can't defeat!"
"So you admit you're worthless?" he asked, sneering.
"Stop it!" I shouted, actually whacking them both on the shoulder with the back of a hand.

I turned and stormed to the edge of the clearing, my back facing them. This is useless. We're not going to save her by bickering over such triviality.

"Your Highness," a soft voice said. I looked up at the source. "It's good to see you." she said, tears forming.
"I'm glad you're okay, Sina." I said, leaning in to hug her.
"It was so awful, milady." she said. "So many dead, and they took Her Majesty."
"I'm sorry, Sina."
"They have your palace, Your Highness." she said, pulling away from my hug now.
"It's not my palace, Sina."
"But milady, if Queen Cecilia doesn't return you would inherit the crown, would you not?"
"Well no, I –"
"And that would make the palace yours."
"True." Grell said, stepping near us. "You must consider the possibility that we are unable to retrieve Her Majesty, milady."
"That's not going to be a problem." I said. "We are going to get her back."

But what if we don't? I'd be here all alone.

“And the palace belongs to all of Sheaubairnia, not the royal family.” I told Sina, hoping it was true. “The royal family are just the ones who get to take care of it.”
“As you say, milady.” Sina said.
“But we have to figure out what to do.” I said, raising my head and turning to look at the entire group that was gathered. “And we're going to stay calm and figure this out right away, with no more arguing.”
“A lot of good it'll do if she's already dead.” one of the guards mumbled.
“She's not dead!” I shouted at him. “She's frightened and angry, but she's alive. I can feel her.”

I went back to the center of the clearing and sat on a rock. I pointed to a rock nearby and stared up at Ceagado, waiting until he sat. He eventually got the idea.

“Explain what these spiritfolk are.”
“Their bodies warp and change shapes, and stabbing them or hitting them with an arrow does nothing to them.”
“They are an amorphous race who lives in the woods.” Grell added. “They don't interact with others often, and usually kill anyone who tries to make contact.”
“So how do we beat them?” I asked.
“We don't know.” Ceagado admitted.
“Our only hope is to reason with them.” Grell told me.
“Which is going to be near impossible, unless we can find a way to communicate with them.”
“They do not speak.” Grell said. “At least that's the assumed theory.”
“We have to try.” I told them. “How do we find them?”
“I have men who know the way, Your Highness.” Ceagado said.
“Great! Let's head out.”
“Milady,” Grell said, looking at him. “It is too difficult tonight. It's at least a two day journey, at any rate.”
“And far too dangerous, Your Highness. You should hold up here with a group of guards and await our return.”
“No.” I told him. “I am going.”
“Your Highness,”
“You heard her.” Grell said. She turned to me. “You have to go.”
“Yes.” I said.
“It is worth the risk to you.”
“Yes.”

“If you die in the process?” Ceagado asked.
“I would die without her anyway. I love her.” I told him.

I would have been embarrassed to say that before. At the very least, I would have been worried it would get back to her. Now all I want is to say it to her face. She may have a sense of my feelings for her already*, stupid spirit binding*, but there is no way she understands the depth of my feelings. I need to tell her.

And then she can send me away again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Two days of mud and rain weren't doing anything for my disposition, so when Grell and Ceagado snipped at each other again this morning, I tore into them before ordering him to the front of the line and her to the rear. I had to stop them, they were arguing like an old married couple. Yeah, it probably wasn't nice to rip them a new one in front of the troops, but I had to do it. For my sanity.

I guess everyone here still sees me as a member of the royal family, despite what Cecilia said when she sent me away. Which is great for motivating them to move along to rescue Cecilia as soon as possible. It's good, I suppose. At least until Cecilia sets things straight.

Oh Cecilia.

I can feel that her anxiety and longing for her father are gone now, and her fear has ebbed. I sense that she has given up on it. Like maybe she knows there's nothing she can do now and is just waiting for whatever is going to happen to happen.

“Into the trees!” Ceagado ordered me.

I didn't question it, and for once Grell didn't argue with him. Those two have been at each other for days, but his order brought enough force with it that she didn't question it.

Grell and I, along with three guards and a handful of servants, moved off of the muddy path and into a grouping of bushes and trees.

And then I felt Cecilia's fear ramp up. Responding to mine? Why can't this thing work differently. Like maybe give us the ability to actually talk to each other telepathically or something.

“Why have you come?”

The voice was a slithering, slimy voice, like a hoarse whisper. I spun around, looking for the source, yet found none. Instead I met multiple sets of eyes, all looking at me as if I were insane.

“What is it, milady?” Grell asked.
“You didn't hear that?”
“Hear what, Your Highness?” Sina asked.
“Hear...”

A shimmering figure appeared out of the misty bushes. It took a form somewhat human-like, but only vaguely. It was like looking at fog that was shaped like a person.

Sina gasped when she saw it, falling down in her attempt to back away. Grell pulled me backwards, and two of the guards stepped between me and... whatever it was.

“Halt!” one of the guards shouted at it, raising his sword.

The figure batted the sword away, then raised it's face skyward, almost as if it were giving him an eye roll. Only it had no eyes, and barely anything you could call a face.

“Why have you come?” it asked again.
“W-we come for Cecilia.” I replied. “We demand you return her immediately.”

The guards – both this time – lifted their swords toward the figure, which I assume is one of the spiritfolk I was told of. It didn't bat the swords away this time, but its face turned toward each, and they fell to their knees one at a time before it.

Then its face returned to me. I was transfixed. I could feel Grell tugging at me, but I was frozen in place.

“You must come, Your Highness.” Grell whispered.
“Humans are not to be trusted.” the hissing voice said.
“The human does not belong.” another hissing voice, this one deeper and booming, said from next to it.

As the second spiritfolk materialized next to the first, the guards once again tried to raise their swords. Sina screamed out a high pitched squeal.

“Don't make us destroy you.” the first one warned, its face once again turning to the guards.
“Drop your swords!” I shouted at them.
“Milady?”
“I said –”
“What is going on here?” Ceagado asked, bursting through the bushes to the spot next to me. “Holy priestess!” he muttered when he saw the spiritfolk. He reached for his sword, but I grabbed his hand.
“No.” I told him.

He eyed me for a moment, then reluctantly nodded, though his hand stayed near his sword. He joined Grell in trying to pull me away to safety.

“Stay your people or this will end swiftly.” the second spiritfolk said.

Despite that, Grell and Ceagado continued to tug me away, and the guards continued trying to raise their swords. Apparently my safety is more important to them than their own lives.

“Do as it says.” I told everyone.
“Milady?” Grell asked. “What who says?”
“What it –”
“Did it speak?” Ceagado asked.
“Stop interrupting Her Highness.” Grell told him.
“You didn't understand it?”
“Your Highness, there were no words uttered.” Sina told me.

Great. Well apparently I'm going insane. How comforting.

“You did speak, didn't you?” I asked the nearest, and first, spiritfolk.
“Yes.” it hissed.

I looked around at the others. Not a single person showed any hint of recognition. Obviously they just don't understand its language.

“It's the necklace.” I told the others, only realizing that is exactly what it was as I was saying it. “You don't understand what they are saying because of the necklace.”
“We don't understand because they didn't make a sound, milady.” one of the guards nearest the spiritfolk explained.
“Seriously?”

Great. Well now I'm imagining things. This is convenient. I get to go insane in a world that can't actually exist. A world that is already insane.

Makes the trip to insanity shorter, I suppose.

“Are you actually speaking to me?” I asked the front spiritfolk. “Can you show some physical sign? Nod your head or something?”

The front spiritfolk turned toward the back spiritfolk. They seemed to be conferring with each other. Then they both turned to face me.

And nodded.

“Foozle!” one of the guards said. It sounded like a swear.
“Indeed.” Grell agreed.
“None of them can hear you?” I asked the spiritfolk.
“WHY HAVE YOU COME?!” the second one said loudly.
“We came for Cecilia.”
“Ask them why they took her.” Ceagado told me.
“Uh, why did you –”
“You!” the first spiritfolk told me.

That's their explanation? Me? Great. So somehow I got Cecilia attacked and kidnapped. Wonderful.

“Why because of me?” I asked.
“We were told of your plan to overtake the kingdom. No use denying it.”
“Told what?!” I shouted. “No. Not my plan at all.”
“You came here to destroy the royal family. Once finished taking control of Sheaubairnia you would extend your reach. You would drive the races here away just as you did in your own realm.”
“*Our* realm!” the second added. “It was our realm before yours!”
“I assure you, I had no intentions of taking over anything, I –”
“Lies!” the second said.
“You have brainwashed the queen, killed her father, attacked the orcs and begun a war within the faeries. All as a precursor to bringing more of your type here.”
“I...”

Were they listening in on the trial? No. If they had been listening then they would have heard all the evidence proving that all wrong.

“You were lied to.” I told them. “I did none of that.”
“You did.” the second said.
“Fine,” I said, waving my arms up at my sides. “Even if you think I did, why capture Cecilia?”
“You are controlling her.” the first said.
“I was back in my world. She sent me away.”
“The merfolk have proof. They have attested to it.”
“The... who?” I asked. “Did you say merfolk?”
“Yes!” the second said. “They do not lie!” he said.
“I didn't do any of those things.” I told them.
“If we are to believe that, why are you here?” the first asked.
“For Cecilia. We are bound, and I could feel that she was scared. I came only to help her.”
“You are bound?” he asked. He turned to face the second, then back toward me. “You tricked her so you could take over this realm.”
“No. I didn't even know this realm existed until she brought me here!”
“Lie!” the second shouted.
“We will know.” the first said.

The next thing I knew, the material form before me turned to mist again. It approached us, and Grell, Sina and Ceagado all tugged at me, trying to pull me away.

But it got to us first, and the others let go with a gasp as the mist surrounded me, then... seeped into me, right through my skin.

It was a tingling sensation. Then I was numb. It lasted only a few seconds before the mist left my body and reformed into its human-like form.

“This one is pure.” it said, turning toward the second. “I believe she is honest.” For some reason they were now letting me hear their conversation, where previously I don't think they were letting me hear the exchanges between the two of them.
“The merfolk do not lie.” the second said, sounding confused.
“The merfolk can be tricked.”

The second spiritfolk seemed to consider this. He vaporized into nothingness, completely invisible to my eyes. Less than a second later there was a strong zap, causing my body to jerk. Then the second one immediately rematerialized where it had been standing.

“Pure.” he said, agreeing with the first. “The merfolk can be tricked.”
“We have mistaken their certainty for truth.” the first said.

“Your people may go.” the second told me, its voice not as booming and intimidating as before.
“Where is Cecilia?” I asked, happy, but not backing down.
“She is with the merfolk.” the first told me.
“Great. Can you have them bring her to us, or maybe –”
“It is too late.” the second said. “She has been taken where we cannot go. To be executed.”
“Exe... I... wh-what are you –”
“For conspiring against this realm.” the first explained.
“You have to stop them!” I shouted at them.
“We cannot.”
“Our people cannot go where they are.” the second told me.
“Wha... wh...” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Where are they?”
“They are deep within Latenmarh Sea.”
“I'll save her without your help then!”

I turned to Grell and the others, and stepped toward them, grabbing onto Grell's shoulders for support. I think I'm going to be ill.

“The merfolk have her.” I told Grell.
“I thought they were just a myth.” Sina said.
“So did I.” one of the guards agreed.
“They're going to kill her.” I said.
“Why would they do that?” Sina asked.
“We have to go get her. Does anyone know where the Latenmarh Sea is?” I asked.
“West of here.” Ceagado told me. “Nobody returns from there.”
“I'll go alone if I have to, just tell me where to find it!”
“Your Highness, were you talking to those, er, people all this time?” Sina asked.
“Yes! Now we need to go!”
“You were standing there silently.” Grell told me. “Your lips trembled a few times, but we didn't hear you speak.”
“What did they say, Your Highness.” Ceagado asked.
“Let's just get going! I'll explain on the way.”
“It is unsafe for you in our forest.” one of the spiritfolk, the first I think, said to me. “I will guide you. Come.”
“We're following them.” I told the others.

We trampled after the spiritfolk. It was capable of moving much quicker than we were, and it would have to stop to let us catch up after it would get far ahead. It actually seemed a little annoyed at our slow speed.

“Your Highness,” Ceagado said. “If you could just tell us what is going on, please.”
“I'm getting Cecilia back.”
“Milady,”
“You don't have to come.”
“It is unsafe for you to go.”
“I don't care!” I shouted, rounding on him. “She is going to die if I don't go! Don't you see that?”
“I will go in your place.” he stated, as if it were obvious.
“No.” I sighed and glanced toward our spiritfolk guide, who looked impatient. “I trust that you would try your best to get her back, but I have to do this. If anything happened to her and I wasn't there I'd... I'd...” I shook my head and tried not to think of it. “There is no way I'm not going. Got it?”
“Yes, milady.” he said, bowing.

We walked for hours. Some of the others would ask questions about what had been said, or what I was doing, but Grell very kindly headed them off for me. From the murmuring behind me I could tell they thought I was crazy. I think I even heard one guard mention forcing me to stop, even against my will, because it was their duty to protect the royal family. Nobody tried, at least.

“It will be dark soon.” the spiritfolk told me. It had stopped at a clearing and waited for us to catch up. “This would be a good place for you to spend the evening, would it not?”
“I want to keep going.” I told it.
“Your kind need rest.” it said. “We will stop now and wait for morning. We will reach our destination before mid-day.”
“Please point the way.” I told it. “I will go alone.”
“You are brave and stubborn, young one.” it said.
“Just point.”
“We will continue.” it said.

Darkness fell. The rain had stopped shortly after nightfall, but it was still chilly and cloudy. A heavy mist hung in the air, giving what little moonlight there was a strange glow.

“Your Highness,” Grell said, breaking my concentration on how scared Cecilia was.
“I'm not stopping.” I said loudly.
“Perhaps some of the servants could stop.” she said. “They are quite exhausted, Your Highness.”
“Fine. Anyone who wants to can stop. I don't care.”

I lost a handful of followers at first. An hour later another, larger group had had enough. That left me, two soldiers, and 3 guards to continue. And Grell. She remained at my side, never wavering.

“I can take you no further.” the spiritfolk told me.
“Where do I find the Latenmarh sea?” I asked it.

Its hand swept across before me and I realized we were at the edge of the water. The mist was heavier here, but I could make out rippling on the surface in the little moonlight that was visible.

“How do I... I mean where do I go from here?” I asked the spiritfolk.
“I do not know where your queen is being held.” it said. “If you wish to make contact, I suggest you enter the water. It is likely they will contact you.”
“Okay. Thank you for bringing us.”
“If you survive your task, please wait at the last clearing from which we came. In two days time I will come again to guide you from the forest.”
“Thank you, we will.”

It dissolved into nothingness. I have no idea how they do that. Are these people really just figments of our imagination? Real ghosts? How does that even work?

So I go into the water and they just find me? Or I drown trying. Or get eaten by whatever is in there, I suppose. I mean there could be gigantic sharks for all I know.

“Is there anything dangerous in there?” I asked Grell. I motioned toward the water, which I still hadn't taken my eyes off of.
“Unknown.” she responded. “If the merfolk exist,”
“They do.”
“They are rumored to be deadly.”
“Great.”

I turned to Grell and gave her a long look. She seemed sad. I guess everyone here is probably sad that their queen will be executed, that the kingdom has been overthrown, that all those men died back at that palace.

“Thank you so much for all you've done for me.” I told her.
“A pleasure.” she said. I think her eyes watered. “Milady, you are not

going in there, are you?"
"I must, Grell."
"Very well." she said, nodding.

Grell placed her hands on my cheeks and leaned forward to bump her forehead against mine. She mumbled something as she did so. When she pulled back I noticed everything around me took on a haze.

"This will last perhaps an hour at most." she said.
"What did you do?"
"You may enter the water now. You can breathe."
"I can breathe?"
"Yes, milady."
"In the water?"
"For an hour."

The guards and soldiers with us stepped forward. Several began slipping from their boots. They were obviously planning to go with me.

"I don't think it's a good idea." I told them. "They could view you as a threat and kill you all."
"We will risk our lives alongside you, Your Highness." Ceagado said.
"No." I shook my head. "They could view it as an attack and kill Cecilia immediately. You cannot go."
"We will go." he said.
"You once again question the authority of your leader?" Grell asked.

Ceagado looked at me long and hard. There was something there. Respect? He seemed sad that I would leave. I reached over and squeezed his hand and nodded. I turned and stepped into the water.

"I would be disappointed if you did not return to continue our disagreements." Ceagado said.

I turned to look, confused at his statement, but realized he was talking to Grell. She was standing knee deep in water next to me. She was mumbling her incantation to herself, and soon the area around her head turned hazy as well, magnified by the haze I was already peering through.

When she was done, I reached out and took her hand, and we walked into the sea. We leaned forward to dive down into the water, letting it cover our heads. It was as if I had a glass helmet on, and the water

flowed over and around it, leaving an air filled area around my head and extending down to my shoulders.

“Something going on with you and Ceagado?” I asked her.
“I have no idea what you are referring to, milady.” she said, but she looked away from me when she spoke.

The water seemed to darken as we continued swimming, continued going deeper. It was less than a minute before the blackness engulfed us. It felt claustrophobic, but there was no way I way I could turn back from this.

And then a yellow-green glow began to form around us. It was a pale color, sickly and frightening.

And then hands gripped me tightly around the arms and legs. Many hands. Not Grell's. I struggled, scared that I would die before getting a chance to rescue Cecilia. And then my fear amplified, because I could feel that Cecilia's fear rocketed up as well.

Merfolk!

At least I thought so.

When my eyes adjusted to the yellow-green light around us, I could see that we were surrounded by some kind of creature that was mostly built like giant eels, except for a human-ish head and many arms. I think 4 arms each. I think.

Their bodies were long and slender, perhaps 8 feet, and smooth and dark. At the back were no feet, but instead the entirety of their lower body was a thick vertical fin. Like I said, sort of like an eel.

Their hands were hard, almost like claws, and seemed to have only three fingers. Their arms were double elbowed, and one set of arms seemed much longer than the others.

Their heads were hairless, with only a slight vertical fin appearing as a mini version of a mohawk on the top. They had long, pointed teeth, and menacingly their mouths opened and closed repeatedly as they moved water through gills on the side of their heads where their ears would have been if they were human. And all of them had glowing eyes the color of a sunset.

“Where is Cecilia?” I asked.

Their grip on me lessened slightly as the two holding me looked at each other with what I think was shock.

“You are human.” One said. What a tired refrain.

It wasn't a question, and it didn't directly look at me as it spoke. It's voice was a raspy, grating sound, and it seemed to come from everywhere in waves over me.

“Yes. Where did you take Cecilia? The queen of the faeries?”

They looked at each other again, then their grip tightened on me. Pain shot through my arms where the grip was tightest.

“Humans do not belong in this realm. They destroy all that is good, killing all that is natural and beautiful.”
“I'm only here for Cecilia.” I told them.
“She can die alongside the queen of the faeries.” another said. “It is the will of Harelei.”

Before I could do much protesting they began to drag us along at tremendous speed. The water pressure pushing against me was beginning to hurt.

And then there was a sudden sense of hope coming from Cecilia, confusing my brain because I was terrified.

We passed by hundreds, maybe even thousands, of the merfolk. Grell never once struggled, but I was still tugging and pulling, trying to get away.

And then there was a domed bubble along the floor of the sea. It had an odd iridescence to it, and reflected much of the yellow-green light that the merfolk were putting off. But as we approached I was able to see better into the bubble.

“Cecilia!” I shouted out.
“Her Majesty appears to be well.” Grell said. At least I think so, since the water distorted the sound.

We were shoved through the membrane that formed the bubble, falling twenty feet to the sandy floor of the sea. Several purple colored

creatures that looked halfway between a starfish and a crab scurried out of the way just before we landed in the soft sand and mud sea bed.

“Renee!” Cecilia shouted.

I almost passed out just from the joy of seeing her again. She pulled me to my feet, wiping muddy sand from my face.

“You're okay!” she said. She threw her arms around me and squeezed.
“I was so scared they'd hurt you.”
“They still might.” Grell said, destroying the moment.
“Of course.” Cecilia said, pulling back. “Why did you come, Renee?” she asked.
“You were in trouble.” I answered. “I could feel it.”
“But you don't belong here.”
“*Thank you so much for coming to rescue me, Renee.*” I said in a mocking tone. “*It's so good to see you again. I missed you*.”
“Of course I missed you.” she said, lightly punching me. “Idiot.”
“I had to come.”
“So we die together.” she whispered.

She hugged me again. Grell walked as far away as the bubble would allow, and was good enough to turn her back to us, offering us as much privacy as she could.

“You were supposed to stay at home, Renee. I didn't want you to ever come back.”
“I...”

I what? I mean what do you say when someone you love more than everything in the universe not only rejects you, but tells you that you shouldn't have even come around to save their life?

I just wish I could die right about now.

“You should have gone on with your life, not worried about me. I forced you to come here, and I will regret doing that to you for the rest of my days.”
“Well that may not be long.” I choked out.
“I'm sorry I got you into all of this.”

She's just saying this all because she feels bad that I had my life changed by coming to this realm, right? Please.

“Your Majesty,” Grell's voice said.

Cecilia and I both turned to her. She was looking to the side now, where several merfolk gathered. One was hovering almost at eye level as it approached the side of the bubble we were being held in.

“Let Renee go!” Cecilia shouted. “Send her back where she belongs, but let her go.”
“What strange creatures you are.” that grating, grinding voice proclaimed.
“Does that mean you will?” Cecilia asked. “I don't understand anything! I keep telling you that. Don't you have an interpreter, you stupid fish!”
“Do you really think now is a good time to insult them?” I asked her.
“They don't ever understand anything I say anyway.” she said, flinging a rock across our enclosure. “This is useless.”
“All it said is that we're strange creatures.” I told her.
“You understand them?” she asked. Then her eyes darted to my necklace. “Oh, right.” She sighed and rubbed her face. “Can you talk to them? Do they understand you?”
“I think so.”
“Tell them as queen of Sheaubairnia I demand they release us.”
“Cecilia, they know you're the queen. That's why they took you.”
“Are you telling me these things plan to take over my kingdom? I hardly believe –”
“No, but Ryson and his people convinced them I was controlling you, that humans were going to take this world away from the people here.”
“Puh!” she said. “I'd like to see them try.”
“I tried to tell them, but they wouldn't believe me.”

She paced back and forth, looking every now and then at the merfolk that was near our enclosure. It actually appeared to be wanting to talk to us, but wasn't sure how to continue.

“I can understand you.” I told it. “You can talk to me, I can interpret for Her Majesty.” I explained to it.
“I did not believe the reports that a mere human was capable of understanding or speaking our language.” it said.
“Well, I do.”
“As I can see very well for myself.” it said.

It mimicked Cecilia's actions, pacing... or swimming back and forth, like it was considering what to say. Cecilia was ignoring me at the

moment, but I could see the hateful look she leveled on the merfolk.

“Does the queen understand the grave magnitude of the charges against her?” it asked me.
“I told her why you took her.” I said.
“Am I to believe that you, the source of the problem, gave a full and honest explanation to the queen?”
“Yes.” I told it.
“Human, you are not in a position to be trusted.”
“My name is Renee, not *human*.”
“You may call me Harelei. I am mother.”

She is mother? Of who? Of all of the merfolk, maybe? But that can't be. Maybe mother is a title, like queen.

“Are you in charge?” I asked.
“I am mother.” it... she? responded.
“You must let us go. You've been tricked by Ryson so he could take over the –”
“We were not tricked!” she said angrily.
“Ask the spiritfolk, they will tell you –”
“Spiritfolk are barely better than a faerie.” she said. “They can only be trusted so far.”

Great. They don't trust or believe anyone. Except Ryson, apparently. How do we negotiate our release when they won't believe a word we say?

“What can we do to prove to you that you were tricked?”
“You cannot.”
“We... but... but –”
“What is it?” Cecilia asked, stopping at my side.
“What do you mean?” I asked her, presumably in Sheaubairnian.
“You had a spike of anger and fear.” she said.
“They won't let us go, and they won't let us prove they've been tricked.”
“So no way out?” she asked.
“Apparently not.” I told her. Then to the merfolk, “Let Cecilia go, just execute me.”
“You would give your life in trade for hers?” Harelei asked.
“That's why I came. To save her at all costs.”
“Commendable.” she said. “But no, you will both die, along with your servant.”
“What? Why?”

“You have had the reasoning explained to you, young one.” she said, smiling. “It does no good to continue discussing it.”
“Then... then...”
“Sleep well tonight, for it shall be your last.”

She disappeared. Everything disappeared. All of the merfolk retreated to a distance, and the light from them barely penetrated to us. I couldn't even see Cecilia.

“That went well.” Cecilia said.

It was a long, long night. At some point the faintest shimmer of light appeared above us, but only enough to make out that it was probably daylight out by now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A group of merfolk came for us. They created a small bubble around each of us, keeping us in our own personal cell, which they controlled with long spears that glowed at the tip. Wherever they pointed the spear, the bubble moved.

“We're going to die, I guess.” Cecilia said.
“Go with honor, Your Majesty.” Grell said, trying her best to bow in the tight space.
“I love you, Cecilia.” I said, knowing it may be the last chance I had to ever tell her that.
“I know.” she said, glancing my way only briefly.
“I...”

I sucked in a breath, knowing I was going to die anyway, so it didn't matter how embarrassed I felt at this point. I needed to say it, even if she knew because of our spirit binding. Besides, it isn't like there would be time for any awkwardness when we're dead, anyway.

“Not as a friend.” I said. “I'm in love with you, like, *in love*.”

I felt heat rising in my face, and I figured she could probably hear my heartbeat from all the way over where she was. I felt an odd sense from her, not... not anger, not sadness, not happiness or joy, not anything I could describe. Like relief, maybe, that I had finally put words to it, at least.

“I know.” she said, barely loud enough for me to hear.

She didn't look up at me this time, only stared down at her feet. I could feel her sense of shame come over her.

She's ashamed that I love her?

I guess it's good they're going to execute us. I mean I think I just might die anyway.

She's ashamed to be loved by me.

I looked up as we were ushered to a spot in front of Harelei. She smiled down at us from her seat. We were in an area sort of organized as a stadium, but with no seats. It was a deep dipped spot in the seafloor, and we were at the base of it where everyone could see.

“Your Majesty,” Grell said. “This is your last chance to tell the truth.”
“Truth about what, Grell.” she asked.
“I suspect you know what.” she said, glancing sideways at me. “It is not my place to say.”
“No,” Cecilia said. “It's too late for that. I already messed that up.”

Harelei called everyone to order, quieting the crowd. Then a huge band played some kind of instruments, making music I could barely hear. It lasted for several minutes before several guards with spiked trident spears came toward us.

Like they needed the spears. We're in bubbles that they control.

“Nereids!” one of the merfolk shouted in their grating voice.
“Defenses!” Harelei screamed out.

Everyone went a little wild. There were merfolk swarming in all directions, some carrying multiple spears to hand out to others.

Several merfolk near us pointed their spears at the incoming... whatever they were, and suddenly there were glowing orbs shooting from the end of them.

But the creatures they were shooting at barely flinched. They were big dolphins, probably twice the size of the merfolk. Only... only not dolphins. They looked like dolphins, except they had a face that was almost human-like, and arms. Not four, like the merfolk, but only two.

As the nereids, I guess, approached us, they would bash into the merfolk and send them flying. Some of the nereids would hit merfolk with their tales, sending them tumbling end over end and far away from us.

There were maybe ten nereids in all, but they were far more powerful than the merfolk. There were four that approached us and cleared our immediate area of merfolk. One nereid grabbed onto each of our bubbles, propelling us away from the fight.

As we went up I looked down and saw one of the nereids fall to the merfolk, their spears tearing into the flesh until the nereid was pinned down to the ground, blood gushing everywhere. That one would not make it.

The nereids chattered to each other on the way to the surface. Once they all looked down at the fallen one in unison. But they continued, pushing us up to the shallow water, onto the beach as far as they could reach.

Our bubbles disappeared as we surfaced from the water, and I sucked in a deep breath before I was completely out, sucking a great deal of salt water as I tried to breathe. I coughed it out, but it was painful.

“What are they saying?” Cecilia asked me.

That was when I realized that for once since getting here I had no clue what someone was saying. I tried concentrating, I even tried speaking to them, but I could not.

“I have no idea.” I finally told her.
“It doesn't matter.” she said. “Thank you.” she said in their direction, then she grabbed onto Grell's hand and helped her from the water.

Leaving me behind.

I trudged up the bank to the sand and collapsed.

“What just happened?” I asked.
“It would appear the nereids rescued us, Your Highness.” Grell told me.
“Why would they bother?” Cecilia asked.
“I am uncertain, Majesty.”
“Let's get away from this water in case the merfolk come after us.” Cecilia said, making her way from the water's edge. “And keep your eyes out for the spiritfolk.”
“They actually helped me get to you.” I told her. “They believed what the merfolk told them, but when they talked to me –”
“Great, I still don't want to deal with them anymore.”

“We're supposed to meet one of them in a clearing, um,” I spun around, trying to figure out directions. “I think east of here. They said they will guide us away from –”
“I don't want anything to do with them!” she said, appearing angry at me.

Okay, I don't get it. She actually *is* angry, I can feel it. Angry and scared. I understand anger, I really really do, but I don't get why it appears to be directed at me.

“Come on Grell, let's get moving.” she said. She turned toward the trees.
“What is your problem?!” I shouted at her.
“You!” she said, turning toward me and raising a pointing finger.

She didn't say any more, just closed her eyes and tried to compose herself. It wasn't working, though. Her anger toward me was seeping into every part of me, destroying every good thing in me.

I collapsed where I stood, taking a hard seat on the ground. She hates me. She really does. She doesn't want me here, and would rather I be away from her no matter what. Even if it meant she died because of it.

“You came back.” she finally said. “After everything, you came back.” Her hand fell. “That's the problem.” She turned toward the trees and started to walk. “Grell!” she snapped.
“Your Majesty,” Grell said, her feet planted. “With all respect, I serve Her Highness, Lady Renee.”
“Stay then.” Cecilia said, never slowing.

I worked very hard not to cry. I don't know how she could hurt me so much. She had to know, had to feel, how severely she destroyed me.

Grell watched me for a long time. I kept catching her out of the corner of my eye as I looked out over the water that was lapping up on the shore. If it weren't for the bluish tint to the sand or the bright green shade of the water I could be sitting on a beach in California. It was really beautiful, and I wished I could enjoy it more.

“I believe Her Majesty was not intending to upset you, milady.”
“Please don't call me that.” I said. “I don't want anything to do with her now, including the stupid title.”
“The title is not stupid,” Grell said. “But if you prefer, I will call you Renee. For now.”

“How is it not stupid?” I asked.
“People need leaders. The royalty has always been honored and revered. “
“But what makes the royal family better than anyone else?”
“Not better. This is how the people here want it, though.”
“I don't understand that at all.”
“A king or queen plays a very important role.” Cecilia said.

I swiveled and saw her standing behind us. She looked very uncomfortable. I could tell she was still angry, but she came over and sat on a large rock next to where I was seated.

“A democracy has a state department, a department of education, a department of transportation and so on. A lot of bureaucracy. A leader there may never know what happens below them.”
“So?” I said.
“Here we are able to respond quicker. And we're more like a parent, always looking out for the best for our children.”
“Doesn't that take control from the people?”
“To a certain degree.” she said, nodding. “But it's what our people want. My grandfather commissioned a study to find out if people would like more local control and voting. They didn't want it, even on a local scale. People revere the monarchy.”
“And if you get a bad leader?” I asked.
“The ruler is overthrown.” she said.
“Or executed.” Grell added.
“You could get a bad parent, too.” Cecilia said, shrugging.

It's true, you could. If you have a bad parent they aren't likely to get your entire country destroyed, though. Of course enough bad parents elect leaders who do.

“We have a long way to go today.” She said. “Get up.”
“You left me behind.”
“Renee, I didn't send you back just so you'd wind up dead on the seashore. Come on. That's an order from the queen.”

I got up and followed her into the forest. It didn't take long to realize that this was not the same area I had been the previous night. No path, no clearing, just trees.

And then there was a shriek.

It was loud and sharp and dangerous. It sounded like a very large cat

of some sort, but who knows. But it was close by.

“Twrch Tryth?” Cecilia asked Grell.
“I do not know, Your Majesty.”
“'Tis only a forest lion.” a slight voice said.

We all turned and gasped at the same time. There, among the trees, was a green-skinned figure with slim build and a pair of pointy ears. An elf.

“Your Majesty,” he said, bowing.
“What are you doing here?” Cecilia asked.
“I came for you, Your Majesty.” he said. “His Lordship, Wynanion, sends his condolences for the loss of your men during the attacks, and wishes to offer his full support.”
“E-excuse me?” Cecilia said.
“He feels responsible, in part, as our spies were aware that an attack on your kingdom was imminent, yet our emissary, Ailyn, was unable to convey this message to you.”
“Oh.”

That's what he was going to tell us? So if the king hadn't gotten sick, none of this would have happened because we would have been there to continue our discussions with Ailyn? Or if Ailyn wasn't such a stubborn jerk about interracial marriage.

“It was very difficult to locate Your Majesty. It was most fortunate that a small group of our people have taken up residence in the nearby mountains and were able to get word from the spiritfolk that you were in need of assistance.”
“If you would have come sooner you would have prevented Lady Renee from risking her life for me.”
“Yes, well, at least we were able to arrange with the nereids for your rescue.”
“You did that?” she asked. He nodded. “My thanks.” she said, nodding.
“If it pleases Your Majesty, I would lead you back to your people at this time. I believe my colleagues already should be with them at this time.”

And that is how we wound up following an elf through the forest all day, him singing and humming weird little tunes as he skipped along in front of us.

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It took hours, but we found the camp with the others. Everyone was falling over themselves to welcome Cecilia back. Weirdly, a small handful ran to me first. And Ceagado welcomed Grell back before he said a thing to either Cecilia or me. Of course they managed to turn even that into an argument.

We gathered around a fire and made plans. After discussing with Ceagado and the representative from the elves, including a very jittery Ailyn, Cecilia settled on a plan.

“Okay, we will make our way to Avensho Outpost, here,” Cecilia said, pointing to a spot on the eastern border of her hastily drawn map of Sheaubairnia. “There we will regroup and arrange our troops with the elves before we march to the palace and retake it. Renee, you will stay there until the attack is completed, then I will send for you so we can send you back where you belong.”

She's making me leave again. Big shocker. It still hurts.

“You're still going to send Lady Renee away?” Sina asked.
“After all she's done to get you?” one of the guards added.
“Would it be possible for Her Highness to stay for the time being?” Ceagado asked.
“When I want your opinions I will ask for it.” Cecilia said, giving them an angry stare.
“Yes, Your Majesty.” they mumbled in unison.

As flattered as I was that they wanted me to stay, it would be very hard for me to stick around knowing she was only allowing it because they wanted me here. With her wanting me gone, I don't think I could stay at all.

“Where are all our... um, *your* soldiers?” I asked.
“Scattered.” Ceagado said. “Many were on the western border, guarding against the goblins, and many are on the border with the orcs, who we still don't trust.”
“Seems like we could use them more right now.” I told him.
“Renee, communication here isn't like home.” Cecilia told me. “We can't pick up the phone and call.”
“Well maybe we should wait until we can round them up.”
“It would take a long time and we'd lose our element of surprise. We'll pick up some along the way, hopefully, but it will take us several days

to make it to Avensho. At that point, we need to go to the palace as soon as we can."
"Makes sense." I said. Maybe. Not sure it does, but whatever.
"Any more questions?" Cecilia asked, looking around at everyone.

There was an uncomfortable pause while everyone looked around at each other. It was obvious that several of them had something to say, but they remained silent.

"Uh, Your Majesty," Sina asked, giggling like she did that first time I met her. I'm glad she is back to that, she seemed so down after Kaena's death. "Will Lady Renee be allowed to come back to visit once you send her away? We'll all miss her."
"Look, you all have three options right now," Cecilia said, anger filling her voice. "Ryson can stay in control of the kingdom, you can help me take back my throne, or you can keep Renee here. But if you're choosing Renee I would suggest we retake the palace first, then you get rid of me later. I hear there are some poisons out there that simulate heart attacks, so I would suggest one of those to maintain support for the monarchy."

Cecilia stood and walked off into the trees. Four guards jumped up and raced after her to protect her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We arrived at the Avensho Outpost four days later. On the third day we came across some of the Sheaubairnian army. There were about forty troops in all. They had heard of the attack, but had not ventured to the palace because they were awaiting orders before abandoning their assigned post along the northern border.

The plus side of finding the soldiers was that they had horses. The troops, who were well rested, offered to let the rest of us ride while they walked. Cecilia said they could rotate with the rest of our group, since we need the troops to be well rested too.

I guess I caused a bit of a stir when I insisted on walking my turn. Everyone was trying to get me and Cecilia to ride the whole way, but it didn't seem right to me. Cecilia rode most of the way, but at the end she followed my lead and took her turn walking.

It took two more days to prepare to retake the palace. Cecilia was very upset with me when I refused to stay behind. She ordered me to stay, and I told her there was no way. She would have to tie me down if she were to leave me behind. She actually ordered guards to come standby to keep me there, but when I insisted I'd go anyway, and pointed out she could use all the forces she could get to retake the palace, she relented in a huff.

A day and a half later we were gathered on a small hill about a mile away from the palace. The attack would be from multiple fronts at once, and the division commanders were conferring to coordinate their timing. And then they headed out.

“We'll remain here until they breach the defenses.” Cecilia told me.
“Cecilia, I really hope this works out.”
“Me too.” she said. I could sense her dread over how this would be if it went badly.

Less than an hour later she was pacing. She was jittery, chewing her nails and kicking at the dirt.

“I can't take this. Come on.” she said, ordering the guards who stayed behind with us, as well as the servants, to lead the way to the palace.

We stopped in sight of the palace. There was a massive battle going on. I saw light orbs flashing, floating through the air and impacting with an explosion against the palace walls. They were being emitted by giant horn shaped things being manned by the elves.

Hand to hand fighting was taking place at the gates, and all around the palace. Many faeries clashed swords with each other. There were slices and gaping wounds all around. And bodies.

And blood. It was splattered everywhere. It looked like gallons of it, though that sounds insane. Some was from our faeries, some was from their faeries, and some was from elves. I think some was even from the horses. It was messy.

A group of our guys made it over the wall in the low spot. Moments later, they opened the gates wide in triumph. There were cheers all around, and our guys rushed through the gates.

Twenty minutes later a flag with the crest of the royal family of Sheaubairnia was raised up from the palace.

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We were guided up the path by several guards, all with their swords still drawn and ready for action. We had to step over the blood and bodies. It was difficult to hold back the vomit that was threatening at the back of my throat.

“So many lives lost,” I mumbled. “And for what?”
“Selfishness, Your Highness.” Sina replied.
“Power.” Grell said.

I hope we don't see Ryson. Poor Grell. No mother should ever have to go through any of this, but especially that.

There was even more blood inside. Somehow it managed to even stain the statues. And bodies. So many bodies.

There was an elf on the ground who I thought was dead at first, but his leg twitched. The other leg was missing. I hurried over to his side and knelt.

“Highness,” a guard said. “It is unsafe here.”
“He's still alive.” I said. “Get a doctor... a healer.”
“He's gone, Your Highness.” the guard said in a kind voice. “I'm sorry.”
“Get a healer!” I insisted.
“It's too late, Your Highness.” Sina said. She was beside me now, too.
“He's still breathing!”
“He is beyond help, milady.” Grell told me. She squeezed my shoulder.
“But –”
“Let him go with as much peace as he can find, Renee.” Grell whispered to me. “He will die a hero.”

I stood and looked at the others in our group. They had stopped several feet up the path and were turned back at us. Even through my tears I could see concern on Cecilia's face. Maybe she doesn't completely hate me afterall.

We could still hear fighting going on in the palace somewhere as we entered. Swords were clanking against each other, and men were shouting. The guards showed us through the entry hall and down toward the residential part of the palace.

“We have secured this wing, Your Majesty.” A guard said..

Hey, I recognize him! It's Roth, the one I met early on. The one the king sent to talk to my parents.

“It's good to see you, Roth.” I said, touching his arm.
“Good to have you back, Lady Renee.” he said, a smile stretching across his face. “I wish it were during better times.”
“Yes, me too.”

In the hallway I could see out onto Cecilia's inner courtyard area. Her oasis. Such beauty, such serenity... destroyed. All of it. The fountain was trashed, the plants were dead... even the benches had been torn apart.

I wanted to cry. Cry *more*. Cecilia's favorite place, the place she is

safest and most able to relax and be herself, and they destroyed it. They killed it. They murdered that safety for her.

My heart was breaking. Cecilia never said anything, but I sensed that hers was too. I could feel it, of course.

Our rooms... Cecilia's rooms, were a mess. There was a nasty smelling goo smeared all around. The guards were waiting outside in the hallway, but even they were coughing at the stench.

“We'll have to stay in a different room tonight.” Cecilia said. “Grell, do you think you could organize some kind of cleanup here?”
“Lady Renee?” Grell asked.
“Hm?” I said.
“May I?”
“Uh...”

Grell awaited my decision. Sina looked on with a shocked face, as did the guards who could hear us. I could feel the waves of anger coming from Cecilia before I even looked her way.

Yep, she's pissed.

“Of course.” I said. And then I added “Grell, um, uh...” I felt silly for saying this to anyone, but especially to *her* “Cecilia is still your queen.”
“Of course, milady.” she said, bowing her head first at me, then at Cecilia.

Grell and Sina stayed behind as a group of guards showed us to the room the king had been using before his death.

“I would like you all to remain out here.” Cecilia said.
“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The guards remained in the hallway as we entered through the outer room, then down the hallway with the crystal floor, to the door with the glowing scene.

“That wasn't what I expected.” Cecilia whispered.
“There is so much blood and death.”
“Oh, of course,” she said, waving a hand. “That's all horrible. I was talking about the open disregard from Grell.”
“Cil,”

“They all like you more.” she said, choking up. “I can't blame them.”
“They do not!”
“Yes,” she said, nodding.
“Cecilia, you're being ridiculous.”
“The way they were practically begging me to make you stay, and then that, and the way the guards smile when you greet them... it's pretty clear they'd rather you be their queen than me.”

I can't argue what happened, but I don't think she's interpreting it correctly. I don't think they dislike her at all, they just also like me. But how can I say that when she is so set on sending me away?

“They like you just fine,” I told her. “They love you, even. They just think you shouldn't send me away. They don't understand that you're doing it for my own good.”
“Maybe.” she said. “Huh, you've been here a few days, how can they be so attached to you?”

I didn't have an answer for that. Maybe they are just being nice because they mistakenly think she really wanted to choose me and that it wasn't just an attempt to cheat the system.

“There's so much damage.” I said. Even in this room there are things strewn about.
“More than I even thought there would be.” she agreed.
“Your courtyard –”
“They destroyed it.” she said, nodding. “They knew how much it meant to me. The staff here must have let on, or they guessed. Maybe even Ryson had been around when he was younger and remembered it was special to my mother.”
“I'm so sorry Cecilia.”
“No matter,” she said, pacing across the room. “We will rebuild it.”
“Is there anything I can do to help?”
“Yes,” She nodded. “Go home. And try not to get into trouble.”

She chuckled a sad chuckle. Yes, try not to get into trouble. She'd feel it. Just like I felt that she was in trouble.

“We will take care of things here, Renee.” she said. “I'm sorry I ever brought you here.”

Every time she says that it hurts more. I wish she'd just once say she still thought of me as a best friend again. It's not what I want, but that would be better than feeling like she doesn't want me around

anymore.

“I guess tomorrow I'll take a long walk around and decide the best place...”

I didn't hear whatever else she said. She was still talking, but my mind shut her off.

Movement behind her caught my eye.

Something or someone slid aside a pile of blankets in the corner.

A person.

He slid from underneath, his eyes wide with rage.

His wings were a deep, angry red, streaked with a horrid gray-green and orange.

His arms were bloody, and his shirt was torn in multiple locations.

There was a grimace on his face and his eyes glanced toward me as he rose to his feet.

“Cecilia!” I shouted in what seemed like slow motion.

There was a knife in the man's hand, and he was raising it as he stepped toward her.

It seemed to take minutes for me to rise to my feet, and as I lunged over the bed it seemed as if I were just floating there in the air as I tried my best to stop the attacker.

I landed on the man's outstretched knife, feeling it as it tore into my side, sliding between my ribs. As we tumbled to the ground the world sped back up around us.

Everything flashed black for a moment.

Guards were above us then, voices shouting, and I swiveled my head as I screamed for Cecilia.

Blackness covered me again.

Cecilia's blurry face jumped into my vision between the guards.

Blackness.

Cecilia's cries for the healer filled my ears, echoing.

Blackness.

I felt her fingers on my arm and saw and felt her concern.

It's so cold. So black.

“Renee!” Cecilia's voice said, reverberating in my ears. “No! You can't die on me! Please don't die! I need you!”

Nothingness.

“...you said you loved me I wanted so much to tell you I felt the same...”

Garbled echoes and blurry images of my parents.

“I love you.” Cecilia said. “That's why I had to send you back, so you would be safe.”

Bright flashes of light.

More dark, empty space.

A purple hippo in a tutu danced and twirled across the darkness before fading completely away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I felt myself becoming slowly more and more aware of things.

Pain.

There was a hand in mine, and I squeezed it tightly. I'm a little hazy on what happened, but I remember an attack on Cecilia. But she's here with me now, so it must be okay.

Wait, this isn't Cecilia's hand, is it?

I opened my eyes slowly, the bright light of the room stabbing into my eyes. It was Grell holding my hand.

I stopped squeezing and pulled my hand away.

“Cecilia...”
“She had a meeting with advisers to decide on a course of action to make sure the kingdom is secure.”
“Oh.”

Apparently I hallucinated all that part about her saying she was in love with me too?

Figures.

I guess the purple hippo should have given it away.

My eyes adjusted slowly to the light, and I saw that I was in the same room Cecilia was in when she was being treated. There were several healers around me, all silently chanting something different. There were leaves pressed against my exposed side, underneath my bra.

Yay. Everyone has seen my nasty reject from Victoria's Secret. I knew I

should have tossed this thing after that last stain.

“What's the prognosis?” I asked the room.
“You will recover quickly.” Grell said when nobody else answered. “But you mustn't move around yet. The knife went deep, Your Highness.”
“How long?”
“You have been here 3 days, milady.” one of the healers said.
“No, I mean how long will I... Three days?!”
“Yes.” he said. “We kept you under as long as we could for the pain, milady.”
“How long until I can go?”
“We expect you to be on your feet in two days, maybe less.” he replied. “But you will need to take it easy for another two weeks, Your Highness.”
“Will I be able to go, um, back to the human realm?” I asked him.
“Yes, Your Highness.”

Well that's good. I guess. At least Cecilia will be done with me. She'll be able to put me out of her mind, other than this silly spiritual binding we have.

I wish I was more seriously injured.

I concentrated, trying to feel Cecilia and see what she is feeling. She's not sending much my way. A good thing, I suppose. That means she isn't afraid or too upset. I do sense a little sadness, but with all the damage that has been done around here I guess that is to be expected.

“Grell?”
“Yes, milady?”
“When Cecilia sends me back,”
“Don't think about that now.”
“When she does, you should stay here.” I said.
“I will go with you.”
“You belong here, Grell.”
“I belong with Your Highness.”
“I won't be *Your Highness* anymore!” I said.
“Please be still, Your Highness.” one of the healers said.
“Sorry, I will.” I told him.
“Then I belong with Renee Harris.” Grell told me.
“You serve the queen of Sheaubairnia.”
“I serve you, Renee.” she said.

I find her dedication very annoying at this point. I wish she would just drop it and stay here. Maybe I can order her?

“What about Ceagado?” I asked her.
“What about him?” she asked. “I want to stay with you, Renee.” she said softly.
“Grell,”

What? Sorry, but you can't? Isn't that exactly what Cecilia is doing to me? I mean it's not the same, but if Grell wants to come along then why should I stop her? It's not like I hate her or anything. She's a very kind lady, and has always been there to support and help me since the beginning of all of this.

“Okay.” I whispered.

I drifted off to sleep, concentrating on Cecilia's feelings. I could sense a kind of calmness from her. That's good.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I'm going to miss you.” I told Cecilia.

We were heading out toward the carriage in the courtyard. The carriage that would take me to the portal back to home.

Not home. This is home.

“It's been an interesting few weeks.” Cecilia said.
“Would it be okay if I visited every now and then?”
“Renee, it...” she sighed. “It's probably better for you if you didn't.”
“Yeah.” I said, trying not to cry. “I guess.”

There was a long, long line of servants, staff, guards and soldiers waiting outside. Even a couple of elves.

“Be well, Your Highness.” the first said as we walked past.
“Your Highness,” the next said, nodding.
“We'll miss you, Lady Renee.” a servant said, giving me a deep bow.

It went on like that all the way down the line. I was overcome with emotions long before reaching the end.

“Take care of yourself, Lady Renee.” Sina said. She was the last person, other than a guard who held the door and Grell, who was coming with me.
“It's been great getting to know you.” I told her.

Sina teared up, and she giggled like she does as she wiped at her eyes. I stepped forward and gave her a hug, being careful not to stretch too far and hurt my still healing side.

“Your Majesty,” Sina said to Cecilia as I pulled away from her. “Would it be permissible for me to go with Lady Renee as well?”

“Sina, you belong here with your people.” I said.
“Please let me go, Your Highness.” she asked me.
“You may go.” Cecilia told her.
“Your Highness?” she asked me.
“I uh...”

I nodded and turned toward the carriage. Great. Another mouth to feed. But ugh, how do I turn her down?

I need to go right now, while I still have the strength not to beg Cecilia to let me stay.

“Live a happy life, Lady Renee.” Cecilia told me. She gave me a quick hug.
“You too, Your Majesty.” I said.

Grell held my hand and helped me up into the carriage. She climbed in behind me, followed by a giggling Sina. Cecilia waved as the guard closed the door and the carriage pulled away.

I watched as my Cecilia, my love, my world, disappeared from view.

“It's going to be okay, Lady Renee.” Grell told me. Her hand slid over my back in a soothing motion.
“No it won't.” I sobbed. “Why can't she love me back?”
“What if she does?” Sina asked.
“She has made it very clear that she doesn't.”
“Perhaps she thinks you'll be happier and safer with your parents.” Grell added.

Right. So all this time all the talk of sending me away is just because she thinks it's what is best for me? Sure, okay.

Seems pretty flippin' unlikely.

It was only a moment before we were at the portal. A guard, one of four who had ridden alongside us, had climbed from his horse and opened the door. He held my hand as I stepped gingerly down the steps to the ground.

“This place is home.” I said to nobody in particular. “I'm going to miss every last blade of grass.”
“Your absence will be felt by everyone, Your Highness.” the guard said.

“Thank you.” I told him.

Grell, Sina and I stepped toward the portal. I took one last look around. Everything here was beautiful. I wanted to burn one last image in my mind before going.

“We should go.” Grell said.
“What's it like on the other side?” Sina asked.

I felt it. Weakly at first, but then stronger.

Fear.

Extreme fear.

It was coming from Cecilia. At first I was gripped by it, unable to move, unable to say anything to anyone. Finally I snapped out of it.

“Cecilia,” I whispered.
“Milady?” Sina said.

I heard a horse racing our way. The guards spun in its direction, their swords drawn. Was this another attack? Had there been another uprising at the palace.

“Wait!” I heard a voice shouting. “Ren!”

The horse came into view, followed by several others. Cecilia was atop the first, her dress and robes flowing out behind her as she sped in our direction. The guards, far behind her, were shouting for her to stop, it wasn't safe.

Cecilia jumped from the horse before it even stopped moving and raced toward us, stumbling.

“Your Majesty!” Grell shouted.
“Cecilia, I don't –” I began, but had to stop when she nearly knocked me down as she thrust her arms around me.
“Stay!” she shouted.
“Cil?”
“Stay with me, Renee! I need you to stay.”
“I thought –”
“What good is our binding if you can't even tell how much I'm in love with you!” she shouted in an angry voice.

“You –”
“I'm in love with you, Renee Harris.” She said. “Stay.”

And then she kissed me.

The End

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